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SHARED REFLECTION ON THE PERCEIVED EFFECT OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE  
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ON STUDENT SUSPENSION DATA IN K-8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE  
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CHRISTOPHER A. D. GRAVES

199 Pages

Racial discrimination in schools in the U.S. has resulted in a disproportionate number of Black students receiving exclusionary and punitive consequences, in which they are more likely to end up part of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and less likely to graduate. The researcher completed interviews with eight elementary school principals in Chicago Public Schools whom were identified using publicly available data. All participants were selected for their prior success in reducing the number of Black student suspensions by at least 20% during the years of 2016-2019. The focus of this study was to determine (1) What school leadership practices enacted by Chicago Public Schools elementary school principals resulted in the reduction of Black student suspensions? (2) In what ways were the teachers engaged to show evidence of the reduction of Black student suspensions?

The qualitative nature of the study allowed for an interpretivist approach to data analysis, utilizing a thematic coding process based in the theoretical framework Culturally Responsive School Leadership (Khalifa, 2016). Five central elements of the theoretical framework were utilized: (1) critical self-awareness, (2) critiquing inequitable practices, (3) culturally responsive teacher development, (4), promoting equitable practices, and (5) trusting adult-to-adult relationships. By following a process of analysis, coding, and synthesis (Saldaña, 2021), four themes were selected: (1) Ethic of Workplace Trust; (2) Shifting Mindsets: Out with Old

Exclusionary and Punitive Habits, In with New Inclusive and Restorative Adult Habits; (3) Misconceptions and Re-Education Towards Restorative Practices; and (4) Shifting Momentum to a Sense of Belonging, Across School.

KEYWORDS: School-to-Prison Pipeline, Suspension, Expulsion, Student Discipline, Student Behavior, Culturally Responsive School Leadership, Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness

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CHRISTOPHER A. D. GRAVES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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C. A. D. G.



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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Research Problem**

It is common in American schools to see the reinforcement of the racist status quo of practices that exclude Black students from school disproportionately over their White students. This phenomenon happens in racially diverse schools, and in schools that are racially homogeneous alike when suspension rates are compared by race. Research presented in this dissertation reveals both a gap in disciplinary consequences along racial lines and the existence of bias in teachers and administrators who implement practices that result in these consequences (Chin et al., 2020; Benson & Fiarman, 2020; Gullo & Beachum, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014). Exclusionary discipline is what will be inspected for recourse, as well as other forms of student discipline and how they impact students. Additionally, leadership can impact various school outcomes and staff behaviors as related to student discipline (Khalifa et al., 2016; Kabaka, 2021; Sakho et al., 2015). Also, only a few studies have examined the link between school leadership practices and how they influence staff behaviors in a way that reduces the racial gap between student discipline outcomes. The purpose of this research is to fill this gap in the literature by investigating further effective leadership practices that reduce the racial discipline gap.

As schools look for ways to improve student learning and behavioral outcomes, especially when considering the racial implications of inequities that manifest in schools, seeing examples of success will be beneficial. Successful models help counter the examples of what we see all too often as secondary to the exclusionary practices: reduced academic performance, and negative relationships between staff and students resulting in reduced mental and behavioral outcomes, thus exacerbating the School-to-Prison Pipeline through indirect exclusionary practices (Anderson et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2018).

## **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine leadership practices that effectively address racial disparities resulting in a reduction in the number of Black student suspensions. Leadership for social justice involves both reflection and action, known more commonly as praxis (Freire, 1970). This duality of both inward growth and outward change is at the heart of this dissertation. Author Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes this by stating, “The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.” Persistent inequalities in schools warrant and dictate transformative action on the part of school practitioners. This includes both staff at large as well as leaders. While literature is abundant in the existing research related to racial disparities in student discipline, how leadership directly impacts student discipline outcomes and does so as a concerted effort to maintain and foster trust is something that is lacking in the field (Furman, 2012).

As racism is so stigmatized in American culture, it is no surprise that there is a denial of how the manifestations of racism lead to perpetual inequities in student discipline data in schools (Gawronski et al., 2008). Only through a true revelation where staff looks for comfort in a new conceptualization of anti-racism (versus denial of racism that exists) can we begin to properly address these issues. A unique opportunity to address inequity exists also in spaces where a majority of school staff are White, where students are predominantly Black and Hispanic and disparities in behavioral outcomes based on race exist (Porter & Walters, 2017).

There is a challenge in identifying racism and racist structures as racial consciousness and unconsciousness. Overt racist acts tip to the point of being offensive, but unconscious acts

are defensible (Westen, 2007). We see this manifest across society, such as when Black Americans are disproportionately denied home mortgages (Personal Experiences of U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Today's Difficult Times, 2022), or when businesses hire a higher percentage of White people despite a racially diverse candidate pool (Quillian et al., 2017), or when Black Americans die at the hands of police for the same types of infractions at a higher rate than White Americans (Edwards et al., 2019). These forms of racism are considered institutionalized as that term refers to the policies that are in place that result in racially discriminatory practices. In the instances listed above, mortgage evaluative processes that allow for the subjectivity of the loan officer combined with the credit score of the applicant, the criteria by which hiring managers are looking for candidates, and the behaviors exhibited by those encountering police combined with where police are more heavily present all create scenarios in which Black Americans are receiving treatment statistically far worse than their White peers.

This institutional racism happens in school as well, as policies developed federally, at the state level, and locally all tend to benefit White families: Family involvement, attendance policies, assessment design, and how high grades are administered and valued are all centered around what White American culture values in schools, and what future opportunities are aligned towards for students. Thus, successful students in this model are going to be more likely to be White when the students and their support structures fit this mold.

There is a racial mismatch between student and teacher expectations, showing a negative impact on student behavior, such as the level of expectations teachers have for students and teachers' abilities to develop a mindset of high expectations in students. As teachers are the ones to determine which behaviors both constitute an exclusionary consequence such as suspension when they are interpreting behaviors and also the ones to report such behaviors, they are



gatekeepers to the furtherance or prevention of these consequences (Gregory, & Mosely, 2004; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). The stereotypes that teachers carry with them create differing expectations and deficits in what to expect from students (Carlana, 2019; Nosek et al., 2007; Toure, & Dorsey, 2018). This disparity of expectations based on race is grounded in bias, not genetic ability. Research shows that adults tend to think that repeated misbehavior in Black students is part of a pattern, history, or trend more often than they do in White students (Eberhardt, 2020). There are multiple explanations for this. This may be because students conform their behavior to match negative teacher expectations or that the negative self-perception of students is not addressed properly by teachers. It is also a form of repeated oppression, as taught by society at large. When adults reinforce the status quo versus disrupting it, they are enacting racist structures such as reinforcing dominant structures that don't match the values of students from racial backgrounds other than White. This is considered an additive form of oppression in its' frequency and intersectionality when combined with different forms of oppression such as sex, gender, ability level, and income level (Shlasko, 2015). Additionally, the intersection of oppression and adultism manifests whenever adults are enacting rules that maintain the order of adults over students versus bringing the students into the decision-making ownership of the classroom. Collective responsibility for learning and schooling does not have to involve students as subservient and always on the receiving end of the rules of school (Bertrand et al., 2020). Regardless, the fact that these oppressive tendencies occur implies ignorance and defensiveness on the part of teachers (Gershenson et al., 2016).

Adultism raises the topic of ideology as it relates to beliefs, origins of knowledge, and power. As adults consider their biases which are grounded in racism, failing to address them means that reinforcement of racist hegemony will manifest in schools. This becomes the

ideology of how school is constructed by the institution of school and reinforced by individuals who serve as teachers. This begs the hypothetical notion of whose knowledge is most valuable. If the biases of teachers go unchecked and unreflected, then they become the beliefs and overall ideology of how schooling is done, and this form of power and prejudice is not only in place but perceived to be the just and right way of schooling (Apple, 2004).

Teachers hold biases, and the unconscious nature of this clouds the ability to uncover and address one's biases (Chin et al., 2020; Starck et al., 2020; Copur-Gencturk, 2020). Adding to this, being able to overtly describe examples of racism names it and simultaneously denies other more covert forms of racism. When these implicit actions go unacknowledged and unaddressed, they perpetuate the racist status quo (Jost et al., 2009; Rudman, 2004).

### **Research Questions**

The following questions will be addressed through my proposed study:

1. What school leadership practices enacted by Chicago Public Schools elementary school principals are present in the reduction of Black student suspensions?
2. In what ways were the teachers engaged to show evidence of the reduction of Black student suspensions?

Determining what practices have been successfully implemented by school-based leadership such as school principals in these settings will help identify practices that can be useful as others attempt to do the same. As school leaders will inevitably look at ways to shift mindsets and practices when addressing student discipline successfully, research helps one envision how their research, training, and guidance may play out in real life. It is common for school leaders to consult or take time to prepare for the implementation of a new initiative, and having thought

through what may exist as barriers, ways to overcome the obstacles, and challenges to consider will help them address racial discipline gaps.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list of key terms has been assembled to help the reader navigate and understand the specific context of this research.

*Adverse Childhood Experiences* or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood; a non-exhaustive list of these include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect, witnessing violence in the home or community, having a family member attempt or die by suicide, aspects of the child's environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding, such as growing up in a household with substance use or mental health problems, instability due to parental separation, or household members being in jail or prison.

*Calm Classroom* refers to a social-emotional learning program in which calming techniques are used in classrooms to regulate behaviors and promote mindfulness; activities typically take a few minutes to implement by an adult facilitator (Moreno, 2017).

*CHAMPs* refers to a class wide positive behavior support program that is either implemented in individual classrooms or also across an entire school to set common expectations for teachers to use when managing behaviors (Herman, 2022).

*Code of Conduct* is a document that school districts typically author, revise, and use to recommend and guide implementation of student discipline in schools; these documents determine expectations for adult implementation along with potential disciplinary infractions that are matched with potential consequences that can or cannot be assigned.

*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* abbreviated as CASEL, is an organization that has determined social-emotional learning standards that are utilized by

schools across the country, and is staffed with professionals whose background and work support positive social-emotional learning outcomes in schools; their work involves policy advocacy, providing resources for training and implementation, involvement in promoting and completing research, and more.

*Colorblindness* is the racial belief that the best way to end or deny discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity, essentially ignoring the impact that these identity factors may have on various outcomes.

*Conscious Discipline* is a trauma-informed approach to managing student behaviors, which relies on research that describes how emotional states result in certain behaviors, shifting how adults see conflict and resolution.

*Critical Race Theory* abbreviated as CRT is an academic concept in which race is considered a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies; CRT emerged out of a framework for legal analysis created by legal scholars (Stovall, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

*Critical Whiteness* is a field of study that aims to reveal invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege and presumes racism is connected to white supremacy (Applebaum, 2008; Harris, 1993).

*Exclusionary Discipline* refers to practices enacted by a teacher or administrator that removes a student from a learning environment when the student has behaved in a way that is deemed to have violated school rules or policies; this can be enforced by a teacher typically in the form of a disciplinary office referral, and utilized subsequently by an administrator or their designee in the form of an In School Suspension or Out of School Suspension.

*Framework for Teaching* is an instructional resource utilized by school districts across the country that provides a rubric for effective teaching. It outlines 22 components and 76 elements organized into four different instructional, preparatory, and professional categories.

*Gradual release* refers to how teachers model behavioral or academic expectations, then have students complete opportunities for practice with some support, then release students to begin practice on their own with feedback.

*Guided Reading* is a small-group instructional context in which teachers support each reader's development within their current level of ability, by breaking the whole class typically into ability level groups; the teacher will likely rotate groups over the course of a literacy instructional period or throughout the week to teach all students through this grouping model, one group at a time.

*Halo effect* refers to a form of bias in which there is a tendency for individuals to form impressions of something based on previous judgments or experiences with the concept or product.

*In School Suspension; Out of School Suspension* are common consequences assigned by a school administrator or their designee in which a student either receives a consequence in which part or all of their entire school day is spent either in a special location within the school or their admittance to school will be refused, respectively; the amount of days in which a student is suspended should match the severity of the offense, and the degree to which a suspension is allowed to be used varies per state and district.

*Insubordination* in this context refers to behaviors of students that may result in disciplinary infractions, as they defy the expectations set and instructions given by adults.

*Leader in Me* is a program used in schools in which staff and students use lessons and resources to develop leadership skills and build intrinsic motivation and pride in their school (Caracelo, 2016).

*Mastery Experiences* is the phenomenon of finding personal success through experiential learning, such as when creating, discovering, exploring, or trying something new (Bandura, 1997).

*Mindful Practices* is a mindfulness program in which students and staff develop a deeper awareness of their body's ability to regulate emotions and cope with stress (Mindful Practices, 2023).

*Multiple Tiered Systems of Supports* is a process by which students are provided with support for emotions or academic needs that ranges from universal interventions to small group targeted attention to individualized needs (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

*The PATHS Program* is a curriculum used in classrooms to regulate behaviors, teach students effective strategies for calming, minding ones' feelings, and solving conflicts interdependently with peers (Greenberg, 1995).

*Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports* is a process implemented in schools that focuses on positive expected outcomes, and motivational techniques that are both intrinsic and external, to help incentivize behaviors that develop into habits as students develop.

*Racially diverse schools* refers here to schools that have multiple racial groups represented within their enrollment.

*Responsive Classroom* is a social-emotional learning program that is used in classrooms to set expectations and routines, while providing teachers with resources and lessons by which to teach safe, joyful, engaging practices (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014).

*School-to-Prison Pipeline* refers to the trend in the United States by which students who receive exclusionary behavioral consequences are more likely to subsequently end up entering the juvenile and criminal legal systems; disproportionately, students of minoritized racial groups and those with disabilities are identified as part of this pathway (Anderson et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2018).

*Second Step* is a social-emotional learning curriculum that has lessons tailored to different grade levels, and is expected to be taught sequentially; students learn emotional development skills as well as social and interactional skills (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018).

*Teach Like a Champion* is a robust set of techniques available to teachers and administrators via training and books, to be implemented universally and through targeted means in classrooms to set and reinforce behavioral and academic environment expectations (Reed, 2020).

*Turnaround* refers to schools that are deemed in need of major overhaul in how they operate to see significant change within one or more outcomes to result in vastly improved cultural and academic improvement.

*Urban schools* refers, in this paper, to schools in districts such as Chicago Public Schools where schools are both densely situated in their geography and also represent a racially diverse student body or majority minoritized population due to their enrollment.

*Zero tolerance* refers to policies that classify certain behaviors that, if exhibited by students, automatically warrant a specific consequence (such as a suspension or expulsion) without further investigation or disciplinary hearing.

## **Kind of Study**

An interpretivist qualitative research study involving interviews with school administrators was implemented. Specifically, this researcher looked at the Illinois State Board of Education Research and Data Reporting website in which annual reports of suspension data are listed for all schools in Illinois by race. The researcher then identified the principal of the top 5% of schools in the Chicago Public Schools system that had shown a reduction in the number of Black student suspensions which all started with at least twenty Black students prior, from the beginning of the 2016-17 school year to the end of the 2018-19 school year (Illinois State Board of Education, 2021). Then, each of these principals was contacted, beginning with the schools with the largest reductions, and sought permission to interview them and visit their schools. The objective was to interview at least 10 school leaders who have led efforts to reduce Black student suspensions in student discipline outcomes while addressing biases in teachers. The study ended up with eight interviews. The focus of the interviews was on how they reduced racial disproportionality for discipline. Particular attention was focused on strategies used by the principals to shift the mindsets of teachers around how they address student behavior.

The factors that contribute to a reduction in suspension for Black students are hard to pinpoint, as schools do not operate as laboratories with strict experiments involving control variables. Thus, the efforts made by school leadership deemed to be the rationale for the reduction of suspensions will be heard and considered. This will also involve the active inspection and dismissal of factors that may structurally reduce suspension without addressing bias and mindsets such as staffing changes resulting in a new interpretation of how to manage discipline or when policies change forcing a new method of reporting or reclassifying which



types of behaviors constitute a suspension. These will be noted and considered as to whether they are the rationale for reductions in suspensions.

### **Theoretical Framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership is used as a framework for understanding how school leaders can effectively address student discipline outcomes (Khalifa et al., 2016). In this framework, the perspective, identity, and lived experience of students of all backgrounds are centered on the overall experience of students in school. For example, how decisions are made by school leadership and staff and the degree to which student and family voice is either incorporated, ignored or silenced is central to the approach of this framework (Jacobs et al., 2022). School leaders have the authority to enact change on this level, involving these stakeholder groups as they intersect with the other stakeholders in a community, including staff, central office leadership, and even beyond, including surrounding organizations (for example businesses, neighbors, etc.) and lawmakers. This requires an awareness of all the social factors that influence and are influenced by schooling (Carter et al., 2022).

In this framework, four critical factors are identified as stated by Khalifa (2020). First, this includes a critical reflectiveness of the leaders to both self-inspect and commit to changing their inherency in reproducing the racialized order that discriminates against minoritized students. Secondly, this involves critiquing the curricula and teacher development to be more inclusive of the lived experiences of students, understanding that it requires support in overcoming barriers created by those who wish to maintain the status quo. Third, this framework involves creating inclusive spaces for students to feel safe and welcomed, leading towards affirmation of their identities as valuable members of the community based on who they are. Lastly, creating opportunities in which members of the community who do not hold official roles

within the school are welcomed and included in opportunities for growth and development of a more culturally relevant and responsive school community.

Of the four factors of this framework, I have chosen to focus on two of these factors due to their close relationship to the work done between school leadership and school staff: critical self-awareness and culturally responsive curricula and teacher development. This research inspects the efforts of leaders to both reflect on and foresee structures and challenges that seek to reinforce a racially oppressive status quo. Leaders then overcome these barriers in the effort to create a safe and inclusive space for teachers to have the support needed to make change happen for students that reduce the likelihood of racially disparate student discipline outcomes as they lead their school staff. This then relates to student voice and community inclusion, the other two factors of this framework respectively, to ensure that students are included and appreciated and that the community is included in moving forward (Carter et al., 2022).

Challenging the order of things has the potential to disrupt various aspects of how schooling is done. This includes affecting the staff culture, the power and dynamic relationships between staff and students, the curriculum itself, and the role of families in the schooling of their children to be more inclusive. In doing so, trust is harmed. When efforts start with mentoring, collaboration, teamwork, and collective efforts, it is more likely that the positive morale of staff is maintained. However, when lines are crossed by those who wish to maintain an order of how things are done, and that process continues to exclude Black students disproportionately more than their White peers, this needs to be confronted. This is uncomfortable and challenging for the staff culture, but necessary. Thus, leaning on the second factor of this framework regarding staff development, it is important to consider how this is done in a way that minimizes the resistance

that can emerge from defiance toward change (Cook et al., 2018; English & Ellison, 2017; Lewin, 1947).

School leaders must consider, as part of this framework, support for staff development. The environment in which the growth of staff takes place is all-encompassing, involving relationships with peers and with administration, as well as the staff member's background, beliefs, and prior training. Following the first factor of this framework, involving the inspection of the leader's perspective and beliefs, there may be a growing disconnect between the leader's stance on issues and that of their staff. Thus, starting with a collaborative and professionally supportive approach towards staff, even when their current belief results in oppressive student discipline practices. Leaders start by starting where their staff is, and then move from there (Brown & Williams, 2015).

Consider, within this framework, the intersecting factors of teacher development and student inclusivity. When the reality in any school is that Black students are suspended at a higher rate than their White peers, if at least one factor is a higher rate of office referrals for discipline reported for Black students, then the beliefs and practices of these teachers should be inspected. This is discussed elsewhere in this research and should also include how the teacher development and training structures meet the need to change beliefs in teachers (King and McTier, 2015).

Having inspected what Culturally Responsive School Leadership looks like, through the lens of the leader attempting to implement change resulting in a closing of the racial discipline gap, the existing research on this framework presents examples of how leaders can incorporate the culture of their students into their leadership practices (Fraise & Brooks, 2015). This can manifest in a variety of ways. One example would be to acknowledge that White culture is a

culture, instead of accepting the norms of White society as the inherent status quo by which to compare other racialized groups. Every culture and race should be compared on equal grounding. This involves school staff caring and providing ways to learn the culture of their students, and for there to be spaces in each classroom for students to share their lived experiences, perspectives, views, and beliefs without having these be critiqued for being different from those of others whose backgrounds are different.

Still, there is significant opportunity for growth in this research field, most especially by including examples of effective efforts to utilize the tenets of the framework to address needs in schools such as racial discipline gaps. Even when principals identify that they have a high level of knowledge of the concept of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, it is not combined with a formal structure for implementation nor formal training provided to teachers. Additionally, to what extent school leaders open themselves up to their own biases, vulnerably admitting and addressing them through introspective growth varies from person to person. Thus, the leadership framework may be either explicitly or implicitly used by the leader without the accompanying use of it in passing the theories to teachers. Even if this is happening, it is not evident. This can be measured by looking for examples, either in interviews or in observed conversations, or evidence of the work, in the implementation of the factors of the framework by principals. If principals are being self-reflective, actively promote an inclusive school culture and climate, develop culturally responsive teachers, and promote student and family voices, then the framework is being implemented. A study in which this is being sought in current practice is necessary (Kabaka, 2021). Additionally, if themes appear from interviews with successful school leaders and present evidence that goes beyond and outside the core tenets of Culturally

Responsive School Leadership, then these may give rise to a new framework that has proven effective in reducing the racial discipline gap.

It is acknowledged in the current research, using Culturally Responsive School Leadership as a framework, that school leaders must be mindful of all the core factors of this framework if they strive for racially equitable student performance outcomes in discipline and other aspects of schooling, while also leaving room for growth in the research in measuring what works (McIver-Gibbs, 2020). There is also a gap between school leaders who state that they use tenets of the Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework and the impact of these efforts on racial discipline outcomes (Booth, 2021).

Embedded within the existing research are factors that are essential to the framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership. One aspect in particular is the concept of safe practice in shifting adult behaviors, grounded in trust. This can be described as a twofold foundation for having safe conversations, in which two things occur. First, if and when a district level of leadership adopts cultural responsiveness and concepts of equity as part of a leadership vision, it gives safe cover for leaders that coach teachers to approach this topic in ways that do not seem critical, but rather universal and mandatory. They must be discussed, and should not be avoided. Secondly, teachers should be allowed control of the conversation, so that it moves along in a way and at a pace that works for them, safely. Ultimately, it lives or dies with their efforts and within the trusting relationship with colleagues, coaches, and supervisors, or the lack thereof a relationship (Marshall & Khalifa 2018). Thus, the concept of trust is investigated. School leaders who focus on relationships first, before a reform-driven approach to school leadership involving building trust with all stakeholder groups instead of a top-down mandates approach, may see more positive results first in school climate and culture and then in results. Still, this has not been

measured through the specific aspect of school involving racially equitable student discipline outcomes (Banwo et al., 2021). In some way, the goal becomes overcoming the intimidation that comes from the discomfort of change, and this can be done through positive, safe relationships grounded in trust. As trust is contextual to each set of individuals, this necessitates autonomy to make the situation authentic to the needs of each person culminating with a desire to change. Once the trusting relationship is established, the work of a leader can take the form of fostering unlearning through critical self-reflection (Marshall & Khalifa 2018).

### **De-Centering Whiteness**

One important opportunity that arises through the centering of the voices of students and our communities through Culturally Responsive School Leadership is that Whiteness becomes decentralized and de-emphasized. If done well, there is no dominant perspective. Engaging teachers in reflectiveness may be challenging at times, involving the need to overcome emotional resistance (Forman et al., 2022). This is oftentimes described as multicultural education, which helps provide a framework for how student cultures and perspectives shape the curriculum itself. This leads to a classroom experience that is more reflective of the students in the room as well as the cultures of students not present contrary to a White cultural norm-focused curricular approach. Even in situations where the entire class is of one race, there are opportunities in multicultural education to bring in a variety of cultural and racial perspectives to present contrary points to what would otherwise be the dominant voice (Lowenstein, 2009; Sleeter, 2001; Sleeter, 2017).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will advance the understanding of effective practices within the field of research on Culturally Responsive School Leadership. This will contribute to the current body of

research on educational racial equity. Through the use of interviews, the unique perceptions of school leaders who have successfully addressed the racial discipline gap and their effect on student discipline outcomes will be explored.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The researcher is aware of the potential limitations of the study. This study was limited to only eight research sites over two school years. As a result, it's inconclusive whether these results could be both replicated in future studies or found in other schools at the same time. Regardless, the evidence of the work completed was valuable to discover.

Additional time spent with each research participant may have yielded further results and additional themes. It is uncertain what would have happened if more time was spent either on interviews, site visits, looking at other points of data to triangulate within the interviews, or other forms of data gathering.

Another limitation may be the timeframe in which the study was conducted. While the gathering of data was intentional to avoid the pandemic and all the myriad factors that persisted during that timeframe, it's not clear that efforts made during this specific time period and reported through this study are relevant at all periods. We live in a different landscape post-pandemic. While there is no evidence that research and work completed before the pandemic would not still be relevant and useful, it should be considered as another form of context and how leadership strategies may need to evolve.

A final limitation of note is that the questions asked in the interviews, while intentionally structured, give rise to a certain types of responses. Any change in the wording, quantity, or aim of questions could result in different responses. Objectivity and uniformity cannot be achieved,

and the researcher took efforts to focus on sticking to a consistent interview protocol and adherence to the choice of words used by respondents.

Despite these acknowledged limitations, the researcher believes that the interview study design presented in this section can be deemed relevant, practical, and well-designed to add to a body of research on leadership strategies that positively impact student discipline outcomes. Other studies with varying degrees of research methods would complement this study. While it's likely that all research done in this realm will have variations, the combination of all responses provides a synthesis concerning the findings of each study.

### **Summary**

In the chapters ahead, research on this topic that exists will be discussed, as well as what can be contributed to the field. First, a description of the current state of racial disparity in student discipline data will be described in detail. Then, the rationale for why this occurs will be investigated. Lastly, a proposed study will describe how listening to the stories told by those who have successfully led efforts to reduce this racial discipline gap can provide evidence of what works. While every context is different, hearing from many in one large urban district and then synthesizing their responses to find themes that are selected will help to move past the status quo by providing actionable next steps for school and community leaders to consider.



## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Relationship of the Study to Existing Research**

#### **Existing Research on Addressing the Racial Discipline Gap**

##### ***Defining Student Discipline and the Current Racial Gap***

Student discipline, in this context, refers to exclusionary practices such as suspension from the classroom or school that remove a student from the learning environment. Nationally, Black students represent 16% of the student population but represent 42% of all students suspended more than once, whereas White students represent 51% of the student population while only representing 31% of students with recurring suspensions. Overall, it can be stated in pre-Pandemic American schools that Black students are suspended at a rate three times higher than their White peers (“2017-18 State and National Estimations,” 2018). Even in years in which the pandemic has affected schools, a sampling of data available from various states shows that while the overall number of suspensions has dropped, the gap between races has not, revealing a continuation of a threefold disparity between Black and White suspension rates. This implies that had the school year continued uninterrupted in spring 2020, more suspensions for Black students would have occurred at rates similar to pre-pandemic levels (Students Suspended from Schools by Race/Ethnicity, 2020; State of Discipline: 2019-20 School Year, 2020).

Additionally, when gender is added, judgments such as Black male students being overly masculine and aggressive and Black female students being inadequately feminine is evident (Ferguson, 2020; Green, 2021). This causes educators to react to students in ways that try to correct these habits, instead of seeing their personalities as valuable to themselves and their identity development. For example, instead of labeling a student as loud and aggressive, it’s possible to see their level of energy, engagement, and socialization as a positive for collaborative

relationship building and work (Morris, 2005). Statistically, males are suspended three times more than females for aggression, though only exhibited moderately more aggressive behavior (Clawson, 2015; Losen et al., 2015).

Black females are 4.7 times more likely to be suspended than White females, and three times more likely that Black males to be suspended than White males (Losen et al., 2015). Female students tend to oftentimes be expected to act with certain norms expected for adults whereas students who identify as male are oftentimes seen as affiliated with gang culture based on attire (Ferguson, 2020; Green, 2021). These notions are not applied and vice versa, implying a stereotype is being injected (Morris, 2005).

It's important to explain the process of a school suspension taking place, step by step, to understand what is causing them to happen. The first step towards a suspension is almost always an office referral, where a disciplinarian is determining the consequence to be assigned. Office referrals can be explained as leading to disproportionate suspensions at a rate of three times higher for Black students than White students (Girvan et al., 2017). The most recent reasons for these referrals are instances of behaviors such as disrespect, disobedience, non-compliance, interfering with instructions, insubordination, lack of cooperation, and verbal abuse (Townsend, 2000). Most of these explanations describe subjective situations and up to the determination of the adult in charge to determine what warrants action (Skiba, 1997). Black students are more likely than White students to then be suspended for these minor behaviors, such as insubordination and disruption (Fabelo et al., 2011). As defined by Heilbrun et al. (2015), soft offenses such as insubordination and disruption may seem less severe than physical or emotional harm, but still, leave teachers feeling compelled to act with consequence. Insubordination can include such things as a subjective definition of disrespect, violating stated or unacknowledged

rules of the classroom such as getting out of one's seat without permission, asking questions without raising one's hand, or not following through on the expected academic task, while disruption might include disrupting the learning of others through talking, making loud or obscene noises, gestures, or other actions that interrupt the classroom structure. Before a suspension, even removal from class for offenses such as these is a form of education opportunity denial (commonly referred to as Office Disciplinary Referrals, or ODRs). A disparity in ODRs based on race begins to emerge as early as primary grades. In fact, "students of color are more likely to receive more serious consequences for the same infraction" (Skiba et al., 2011, p. 102).

Office referrals are important because the time students spend outside of the classroom due to office referrals results in lost instructional time. At its most basic level, the denial of instruction is a civil rights violation (Losen & Skiba, 2010). This removal from educational settings results in an increased likelihood that students will enter the juvenile justice system (Balfanz & Fox, 2014), and it can impact public safety (Finn & Servoss, 2013). This can happen by both decreasing trust between juveniles and their communities, and by creating opportunities in which suspended, expelled, and otherwise, students who have been removed from the school setting temporarily or permanently (ex. by dropping out) choosing to spend time that they are not employed nor in school by making illicit choices due to lack of adult supervision when suspended from school (Kim et al., 2010).

Student behavior alone does not explain differential suspension rates. Thus, policies should not lead to disproportionality when implemented (Lhamon & Samuels, 2014). Numerous studies have highlighted the disparity of racial discipline disproportionality even after controlling for race as it relates to the percentage of minoritized students attending a school correlating with

suspension rates (Skiba et al., 2014). When minoritized students are underrepresented in lower-level infractions (ex. Detention, family and administration conferencing, etc.) and overrepresented in exclusionary consequences such as suspension, which is often the case, it indicates that these students are being pushed out without giving the same opportunities for restitution (Skiba et al., 2011).

### ***In School Suspension***

Often the next step in punishment after an office referral is In School Suspension (ISS), which often means the student is placed in a classroom, away from other students, for partial or full days. Black students were 1.47 times as likely as White students to receive ISS when controlling for other student and school characteristics (Cholewa et al., 2018). Even without the same exclusionary consequence of being sent out of school, being removed from the classroom has dire consequences. Cumulative Grade Point Averages of students tend to be on average .35 points lower for students who have faced In School Suspension (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Additionally, students who receive an In School Suspension are more than four times as likely to drop out of school (Cholewa et al., 2018). It also has been shown to lead to a lack of academic engagement, such as Black girls being less likely to engage in and choose academic paths in math and STEM courses (Ibrahim et al. 2021). Research also indicates that student misbehavior increases, rather than decreases, after receiving an In School Suspension (Fabelo et al., 2017; Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2017). There is also evidence that a suspension that is held in school can be done in a way that prevents the likelihood of receiving an Out of School Suspension (Anyon et al., 2018). Examples of how this is done include structures that are put in place to give alternatives to suspension (ex. Counseling) and restorative practices that help teach skills to address behaviors. Additionally, engaging instruction and curriculum, as well as

state teacher-to-student relationships help keep students focused on instruction and less likely to get off track and make choices that result in consequences (Anyon et al., 2014).

Considering there is a 46% gap in the rate of how Black and White's students are treated in school when controlling for similar behaviors upon school entry, it can be stated that behaviors worsen as a result of exclusionary practices such as suspension. Thus, discrimination can be a mutually reinforcing discipline spiral, resulting in measurable racial inequality (Owens et al., 2020).

### ***Out of School Suspension***

The next level of punishment after In School Suspension is an Out of School Suspension. This is when a student is punished by not being allowed to come to school anywhere from missing one day to the rest of a school year. One study found that the national suspension rate was as follows: 28% of Black male students, 17.9% for Black female students, 10% of White male students, and only 4% of White female students (Losen et al., 2015). Another study revealed that, per 100 students in 2011-12 in California middle schools, Black students missed 25.5 days of instruction, whereas White students only missed 4.9 days due to exclusionary disciplines such as suspension or expulsion. Though these numbers declined to 10.1 and 1.5, respectively, four years later, a gap persists (Losen & Whitaker, 2017). Additionally, when comparing suspension rates with student outcomes, a statistically significant inverse relationship between each type of suspension (i.e., ISS, OSS, combined, and not reported) and academic achievement exists (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Thus, denying the opportunity to learn through ISS and/or OSS negatively impacts academic progress. Students who are excluded from school are more likely to associate with those outside of school who have already made alternate choices

such as antisocial, illicit, and illegal behaviors such as those in gangs (Patterson, 1992; Skiba et al., 1997).

It is also common that students who are spending time outside of school during school hours are unsupervised, and their guardians are unaware of the choices they are making and unable to influence what may be choices that lead to destructive decisions. Suspension may have an adverse effect, by pushing students away from helpful resources such as those available at school, and into situations in which those outside of school who may tempt deviant behaviors can influence otherwise (Skiba et al., 2002). We make choices as teachers and administrators that result in these divergences and disparities (Eberhardt, 2020).

A more severe form of exclusion is that of assignment to an alternative school. In a study of Kentucky's Jefferson County Schools, Black students are sent to alternative schools in elementary, middle, and high school levels at 42% higher rates and 39% of students sent to alternative schools end up in juvenile detention centers. As it relates directly to race, "The salience of race is undeniable. African American males are overrepresented in both those placed and those subsequently detained reinforcing the presence of a School-to-Prison Pipeline (Vanderhaar et al., 2014, p. 21). The Department of Justice and the US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, stated in a Dear Colleague letter that current racial disparities in student discipline constituted a violation of federal anti-discrimination laws (Lhamon & Samuels, 2014).

Thus, it is no surprise that there exists a 14 percent academic performance gap on standardized tests, between students at the schools with the highest and lowest use of suspensions (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Additionally, roughly 11 percent of the racial gap in academic performance between Black and White students is due to school factors such as disciplinary practices (Beck & Muschkin, 2012). There is a clear positive relationship between

the level of exclusion and diminished academic performance. Thus, if students were suspended, they performed worse academically, but the impact was less or even null if disciplinary infractions resulted in no punitive action (Anderson et al. 2019). In subsequent academic performance post-suspension, students with high suspension rates were on average three to five years of performance behind their peers who had not been suspended, with the effect worsening annually (Arcia, 2006). There is a similar statistically significant inverse relationship between both suspension and academic performance, as well as a positive relationship between suspension and dropout rates (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Thus, it can be stated that significant research supports the notion that Black students are suspended at a higher rate than their White peers and this has a detrimental impact on academic performance. “African American students, and to some extent Latino students, are subject to a higher rate of disciplinary removal from school. These differences do not appear to be explainable solely by the economic status of those students, nor through a higher rate of disruption for students of color” (Skiba et al., 2011, p. 104).

### ***School-to-Prison Pipeline***

Following a suspension, when students return to class, the loss of instruction that they have experienced results in them falling behind their peers (Gregory et al., 2010). Compounding this loss over time increases the chance that students will drop out of school. When the increased likelihood of dropping out is realized, it is no surprise that this results in adolescents, teens, and adults who end up at this point being pushed into an alternative economy to have financial success because the school no longer provides a path (Hatt, 2011a). Choosing to break the law to find means by which to provide for oneself, due to being pushed out of school, is a basic explanation of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. In a more extreme example, the School-to-Prison

Pipeline can be seen visually as a link when students are referred directly to law enforcement as a result of behaviors that are determined by adults to have violated the law, thus landing a student in prison or alternative program such as juvenile justice detention (Staats, 2014). Punitive policies implemented in schools over the past few decades have caused students to receive exclusionary consequences for misbehavior, resulting in their disengagement from school and increased likelihood that they will choose alternate behaviors outside of school. When this happens, it's likely that students will get caught and arrested, thus ending up in the American prison system. Additionally, it's clear that when adolescent and teenage students are presented with opportunities outside of school (oftentimes on days when they are pushed out of school through suspension or expulsion) in which they can make quick and large amounts of money through illicit choices such as selling drugs, they are more likely to do so. These actions increase the likelihood that they will end up getting arrested and entering the criminal justice system. This is the process known as the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Hatt, 2011a).

### ***Teacher Bias and Discipline***

The research above clearly demonstrates there is bias in school discipline, with Black students receiving harsher and more frequent punishment than White students. To better understand this context, I will discuss teacher bias followed by administrator bias in schools. First I will discuss types of bias followed by the teacher to student bias and race, White teachers' resistance to addressing bias, and research-based strategies for reducing bias in discipline. School decisions and factors within the control of staff are a stronger indicator of racial discipline disproportionality over student behavioral choices (Wu, S. C. et al., 1982).



### ***Types of Bias That Influence Decisions Around Discipline***

Bias traps, as described by Staats (2014) include confirmation bias, negativity bias, or the halo effect, which are a few examples of types of biases that prevent individuals from moving beyond bias. We get trapped into a specific approach and tend to believe sources or information that support that theory versus, at times, overwhelming evidence that states the counter. In fact, over 180 forms of bias have been identified with some of these more likely to be present in schools than others. For example, in-group bias is another form of bias that exists in the workplace, in which we tend to act and think like those who are similar to us, leading to groupthink, which helps set school-wide policies such as situations in which a few adults wish for a policy like zero tolerance for physical incidents between students, and others adopt, follow, and implement these same policies across the school.

Negativity bias is when we have a negative experience, which is easy to imagine in the context of student discipline, that reinforces biases more powerfully than positive ones. A situation in which disruptive behaviors that occur in mostly African American students lead to teacher frustration would be an example of negativity bias. The Need for Speed bias happens when we tend to cut corners, similar to a “fight or flight” situation, and oftentimes do not make decisions with the full perspective. This can lead to negative consequences for students, as adults make in-the-moment decisions when feeling that they are necessary to end an uncomfortable situation like a student who is being disruptive and there is an option to send the student to a disciplinary office. Attribution bias, another easy one to see in schools with racially disproportionate student discipline outcomes, occurs when we judge others on their actions but judge ourselves on our intent. An example of this might involve teachers judging students based on their disruptive behaviors, which may be due to their desire to get answers and be engaged in

the lesson, whereas our reactions to the students may be harsh and negative, but believed by the teacher as something as good intent to manage the lesson and teach the student to behave properly through redirection and reprimand. The intentions do not necessarily meet the impact. Lastly, sunk-cost bias happens when we follow a course of action because we've invested time, energy, and effort. So, this can be a challenge as to why disrupting how teachers manage class behaviors would lead to a disruption in this sunk cost, even if it leads to improved outcomes (Fuller and Murphy, 2020).

Distinguishing between implicit and explicit bias, a definition can be used, in context. In societal examples where bias is investigated, explicit and implicit bias tends to be dichotomous. Oftentimes, their impacts do not correlate. Explicit bias involves situations in which direct questions, statements, or assumptions are made about protected classes such as students of certain racial backgrounds when naming the exact descriptor. Thus, stating that one believes something about the abilities of another based on their race, gender, or another form of identity due to that factor is an explicit assumption. This manifests in everyday life, in research studies, and in political rhetoric as stated by public officials as they discuss and make generalizations about people by focusing on this form of identity. Regarding student discipline, this manifests when we see disparate suspension rates along racial lines. It's promising to note that, when looking at how bias manifests, examples exist in contrast where bias is eliminated or does not exist, thus giving examples as to what works to reduce bias exist at times in districts where bias has been addressed directly and also when there are higher percentages of Black students (Jost et al., 2009; Chin et al. 2020).

### ***Cultural Disconnects***

Considering the average White American's social circle is 91% White, it is likely very common for White teachers to operate in almost entirely White social and teaching circles, affecting bias directly (Benson and Fiarman, 2020). Without actively having different adult racial perspectives in the professional lives of White teachers, we can develop bias traps, describing it as what is missing from one's perspective (Fuller and Murphy, 2020). Alternately, listening to those with different lived experiences, and being a part of conversations that feature diverse voices all help combat this bias. The type of community that we grow up in helps us develop our biases, insulate us from how the rest of the world experiences many of the same things we experience albeit differently and influences our ability to establish relationships with one another (Butler, 2017; Cook et al., 2018). Additionally, backfire effects that manifest from defensiveness and denial become challenges that we have to encounter both internally and in others. These come in the forms of colorblindness. The issues need to be acknowledged and addressed, or else we serve to reinforce the status quo and deepen the biases instead (Gullo et al., 2019).

The cultural disconnect between how White teachers and students of different racial backgrounds were raised may explain the discipline disparities at least in part. Consider the example of how students respond to teachers differently, based on culture: A Black student, based on the culture in which they were raised, may expect a teacher to act with authority similar to how adults in their lives to act. When that adult instead acts friendly, it may not seem authoritative, and thus the behavioral instructions given may seem more like a request instead of a directive. If the teacher doesn't exhibit their power, as if they are trying to make the class feel communal and to empower the students, then students who are raised to respect authority as the source of power may misbehave, thinking that it's acceptable to defy the rules because they were

empowered to do so. This can then result in consequences when the teacher feels that they are being disrespected when it was that teacher who established rules that did not incorporate the student's schema of power (Delpit, 1995). Similarly, teachers tend to want to discipline Black students more harshly and more readily than White peers when a pattern of behavior emerges (Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015). Consider how negative interactions can escalate behaviors, combined with an over-detection of behaviors present in one racial group versus another, leading to situations in which Black students end up in situations where they feel targeted and pushed to act and react to the behaviors of adults.

### ***Likelihood of Discrimination by White Teachers***

Since more than half of Black students in the US attend majority-minority schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a) and roughly 79% of teachers are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b), the instances in which White teachers may exhibit discrimination towards Black students is commonplace. Race matters in these instances, as evidenced by research that reveals how Black students are treated more positively, with higher expectations and positive interactions with Black teachers than with White teachers (Downey & Pribesh, 2004).

One explanation for this disparity exists in discipline and academic outcome data related to teacher bias (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Suspensions are responsible for one-fifth of the differences between Black and White students' academic performance even after controlling for other factors such as socioeconomic and family makeup (Morris and Perry, 2016). Because there is bias by teachers perceiving that Black students have lower potential and are more likely to misbehave, Black students fall into a category of receiving higher rates of suspension (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Hatt, 2011b). White teachers are 15-18% more likely to suspend Black students

than Black teachers would, and often employ strategies such as countering evidence of discrimination, openly doubting research, or do not plan to do anything significantly different once presented with new information (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Mueller, 2017). If White teachers feel threatened, they may often dismiss the information as irrelevant, repressing anxiety and guilt (Evans et al., 2021). White Americans, especially in the context of schools, are unfamiliar with and afraid to talk about race openly because they are afraid of being labeled racist (DiAngelo, 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). These teachers oftentimes lack the skills to talk explicitly about race due to it not being required of American society to do so (Michael, 2015). Thus, an anxious void exists between what may be one of the most important topics to discuss regarding how race implications play out in schools, but those charged with enforcing rules are afraid to approach the topic (Pollock, 2008). White professionals frequently avoid confronting inherent racism and have not considered how professional practices might unintentionally or unknowingly reproduce racial inequalities (Scheurich, 2003).

White teachers also oftentimes display defensiveness about topics such as racial equity, addressing assumptions of racial bias and racism, and discussing White privilege that manifests as avoidance of topics related to race, racism, and privilege, resulting in refusal to listen to others' perspectives, whether they be students, parents, colleagues, or experts in the field (Hill, 2008; Hines, 2016). Teachers, especially White teachers, who may consider themselves well-meaning, without realizing it or choosing to dismiss serious issues that exist systemically, accept their intentions as sufficient without focusing on the impact of their actions (Swanson & Welton, 2019; Amos, 2016). Some examples of this include how teachers unconsciously nominate White students for character awards, focus their attention on noticing and redirecting the behaviors of Black students, having different academic standards for Black students than White students (ex.

Considering a C sufficient for a Black student but expecting better out of a White student), or setting values and expectations based on White norms or those held personally by a White teacher instead of co-creating these with the cultural norms of other races involved (Benson and Fiarman, 2020). If and when White teachers are called out for these unintentional actions, it's important yet hard to avoid being defensive. Feelings are likely hurt, and that impact is more important than the intentions of the teacher. What matters most is the impact of the action, though White teachers oftentimes deflect by focusing on their actions. For example, if a Black colleague or student tells a White teacher that they feel hurt that they were cut off when speaking, the White teacher may focus their response on how they were just excited to add to the conversation rather than how it hurt their colleague or student (Oluo, 2019).

Additionally, how a teacher views a behavioral event influences how it is addressed both in the moment and potentially resulting in disciplinary action later (Carter et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014). Ambiguity, a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, and implicit societal associations are all explained as factors that unfairly result in disproportionate exclusion based on race (Staats, 2014). This bias extends back to the earliest interactions in schools, such as in preschool programs, leading to patterns of negative interactions that influence both teacher and student. It results in implicit racial bias affecting teacher and student relationships throughout schooling through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Westerberg, 2016). Cultural norms that dictate what and how students should dress and act in school influence how teachers notice, react, redirect, and discipline students, leading to a higher focus and more attention paid to students such as those who are Black. For example, Teachers who notice student behavior that does not fit with their expectations target students and fixate on them more frequently than those who do not (Yamamoto, 2013).

The race of teachers correlates with the management of students in classrooms based on student race. Teachers acknowledge spending time focused on Black male student behavior 52% more than what chance alone would presume (Gilliam et al., 2016). White teachers tend to exhibit microaggressions toward minoritized students (Toure & Dorsey, 2018). An example of this includes White staff denying and minimizing racism, Black students expected to exhibit behaviors of deviance, being looked at as second-class citizens, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, and ascription of pre-determined intelligence (Arsenault, 2018; Hatt, 2011b). In one study, for example, White teachers were significantly more likely to expect that their Black students will misbehave (Gershenson et al., 2016). White teachers' expectations result in situations where Black students are disciplined more frequently and more severely by White teachers than by Black or Latinx teachers (Holt & Gershenson, 2019; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). The gap between the rate of suspension and the rate of suspension-worthy behavior as being attributed to bias and a disconnect between the beliefs of staff and students regarding what constitutes appropriate behavior (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987).

### ***How Bias Can Be Addressed***

There are particular ways that these biases can be addressed. For example, reflective mindful strategies can be used to pause and reflect on how to react in moments when bias kicks in to prevent it from being the dominant influence on one's decision-making and actions (Benson et al., 1994). Causing this to happen on a grand scale within an organization and societally is the challenge. We tend to focus on our frame and lens, we are told a single story and one path toward an outcome. Segregation in the personal lives of school staff outside of work perpetuates this, as when school staff associate with those that look like them, they lack the diversity that comes from their view. Additionally, race-conscious professional development where teachers

interrogate their own beliefs alongside and under the direction of school leaders has proven to be one method of professional learning that results in reducing discipline gaps between racial groups, but this is hampered by implementation barriers. This is due to resistance, lack of buy-in, costs, time to implement and see visible results, and more (Cook et al., 2018).

One strategy to address bias involves a discussion amongst teachers following the screening of a film on the bias, explaining the research of what manifests in response to depression in White girls (self-harm) versus Black girls (external aggression and fights). This involves the challenges the school leader encountered in dealing with the mindset issue of those who acknowledge that bias exists but fail to recognize it in themselves. Still, the anecdotes shared by this school leader are not focused on a school with nearly all White students and reflect her current status as a work in progress. Further research on this topic will help reveal trends that school leaders are implementing as well as their relative impact (Brazwell, 2018).

Structural changes, such as those to policy and practices through training, can be implemented at a leadership and legislative level (enforced conjointly). How school leaders shift mindsets involves rethinking the learning environment to become more responsive, culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining. This culture is built on the premise of supporting those most impacted per research done through a lens of race versus excluding them. Reflection and reflexivity can move these practices, as those in power can change their understanding and resulting actions (Khalifa et al., 2016; Mendoza et al., 2010). This builds on the foundational work of culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Gay, 2018).

Teacher training is ubiquitous in schools, and training could be provided for teachers in ways that help them understand bias and its' potential impact on student outcomes. Having



teachers learn about the lived experiences and perspectives of students of different backgrounds can help them learn to support and connect with students differently. Simply encouraging and teaching how to show empathy also helps in this relationship development and can reduce the likelihood of assigning harsh consequences. Overall, increasing positive interactions between students and teachers of all racial backgrounds helps deepen their understanding of one another, leading to greater support for students, and ultimately less harsh punishment (Warikoo et al., 2016).

### ***The Role of the Principal***

The principal's school leadership role is critical in reducing racial discipline disparities, as this individual wields the status of being charged with implementing policy and being held accountable for school and student results while holding staff accountable for the same (Gray, 2020; Williams et al., 2020). School administrators serve a duality of either perpetuating or diminishing the racial discipline gap, due to both their role as disciplinarians and their leadership of school staff's development. The subjectivity of discipline policy implementation is something that is within the locus of control of administrators (Brown, 2018; Gullo et al., 2019). School leaders contextualize a definition of equitable leadership rather than being universally defined. Building off this, the need for leaders to think through research, scholarship, and teaching, to get to a place where students receive unbiased support through the established curriculum and the hidden curriculum of the school's cultures and norms is essential to confronting bias (Dantley and Tillman, 2006).

It cannot be ignored that there is potential for administrator bias, as well. Administrators of all racial backgrounds, on the aggregate, tend to favor White and Asian students in disciplinary situations. Both the policies used by administrators and the decision-making process

used by them can be flawed and biased. There is a dichotomy that exists between the potential of subjective decision-making to be able to be used to benefit and support students when they struggle, versus objective rules that can, unfortunately, hurt all students. While using judgment and contextual knowledge of situations may help prevent avoidable consequences (ex. Eliminating a zero-tolerance policy for a student drawing gang signs, when an investigation may lead to finding that the student doesn't know the significance of the images), only with calibration, consistency of implementation, and fairness can we determine that this leads to a more just outcome. The combination of developing objective systems and structures with a continued focus on what can be done about disparate impacts of exclusionary discipline practices is necessary (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Without that, inequities persist either through unchecked and unresolved bias or through harmful policies that exclude students from school.

As described above, there is a disparity between suspension rates by race for the same behaviors exhibited where African American students are suspended significantly more than their White peers for what is perceived as disruption. Teachers make judgments about whether student language is disrespectful, disruptive, or in some other way sufficiently unacceptable. They determine when a student should be referred to the office. Turning attention to how leadership addresses this issue when considering consequences, the pivotal role lies with the principal for two reasons. First, the principal or their designee must make a judgment on whether the misbehavior is serious enough to merit school suspension. Secondly, the principal is primarily accountable for leadership practices that influence and affect the staff, the school culture, and the students. Addressing the racial discipline gap issue starts at the top.

Principal endorsement of zero tolerance positively correlates with suspension rates, even when holding constant school-level demographics. School suspensions were higher in schools

where principals endorsed zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, to help maintain order in their schools (Luna & Wright, 2016). To lead the building of capacity and collective learning, leaders of our schools and districts must start with their vision.

### ***School-Wide Efforts to Reduce the Racial Discipline Gap***

One way to address misbehavior and reduce suspension is through a vision that guides student behavior, which needs to be developed fairly and inclusive of the cultural values of all students. A vision statement can inadvertently reinforce the cultural values of the exclusive few who write it if not inclusive of a diverse set of voices, without incorporating those of potentially marginalized voices. Not only do those developing a school vision to be conscious of our cultural beliefs and how they influence decisions in schools, but this need is heightened when working in schools where the teacher is a member of ‘mainstream’ society but is teaching in a ‘pluralist’ society. Racially diverse and minority-prevalent schools are much more pluralist, representing a greater snapshot of today’s youth, and thus should challenge the approach to school-based decisions (Ritter & Lee, 2009). A well-structured, evidence-based approach to implementing behavioral interventions has been proven to reduce exclusion and increase high-quality, culturally responsive curriculum for students of color. This cultural awareness and cultural education lead to closing student discipline gaps (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

Prevention programming has the desired impact of reducing suspension rates. Specifically, this programming scale asks about the extent to which schools provide a variety of support services including conflict resolution and behavior management, bullying prevention, character education, and drug and alcohol prevention. Involvement in social emotional and career-related programming, keeping students occupied and engaged after school, would also fit

this criterion. Therefore, a lack of engagement can be linked to a greater likelihood of risky behavior (Shirley, 2013).

We know that broader social and economic forces such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion shape most of the problems of youth violence in America (Carver, 1975).

Communities outside of governmental directive influence behavior, striving to reduce violence.

Recommendations for various methods of preventing disengagement amongst youth leading to violence, including primary, cultural, and structural methods, while most directly relevant are programs such as early childhood intervention support and education for families, and addressing trauma through supportive social-emotional programming (Kramer, 2000).

The responsibility to support students lies at least partially in relationships. Social bonding as a concept is the belief that youths with stronger social ties develop in ways that result in a reduced likelihood of engaging in and maintaining delinquent behavior, and is categorized as including attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. When students feel supported by school staff and friends, they are more likely to develop effective ties to school and display socially acceptable behavior. When schools help establish well-defined educational goals and invest greater effort on the part of students intrinsically, they display higher aspirations and are more likely to be committed to the educational process overall (Stewart, 2003).

### ***Awareness and Bias Affecting the Racial Discipline Gap***

Not being aware of what and why and how staff enter into discriminative practices cultivates a mindlessness that, in the end, reduces humanity and fosters cultural division even when it is not intended. Cultural deprivation of ethnic studies education, for example, reinforces the cultural values of one culture only: the dominant one, marginalizing all others. Schools

should operate as mutual communities of learners, addressing problems that arise that extend beyond mere academics (Bruner, 1996).

Becoming aware of practice is a necessary step in addressing bias and ignorance. Culture is created collaboratively. Instead of teaching students as passive vessels to receive our instruction, schools should engage in discourse in a dynamic, living context. Being not only aware but morphing to adjust to the needs of the school community changes cultural practices. This can be deemed as an enabling community and includes an activity known as a Dialog Conference, which can be defined as a very inclusive and community (such as a classroom) driven protocol, in which all voices have equal value and are holistic in their incorporation of ideas. Engaging in this makes one more open to the views of others by the nature of this format, and can be influenced by what is heard (Shotter, 1998).

### **Literature on Barriers That Exist in Putting These Effective Practices into Place**

#### ***Ignorance Through Colorblindness***

This discussion of developing a critical consciousness of the awareness of racism and how it manifests in systems and structures in school, such as how student discipline is unfairly administered, is a form of unconscious bias. If this is overlooked, improvement efforts will not be realized (Benson & Fiarman, 2020). It may not be an exaggeration to say that if educators do not examine and counter their biases, improvement efforts will always fall short. Bias sabotages progress. The same can be said for how student discipline is managed. Our social justice mission is to support our student's well-being and behavioral development fairly and equitably.

Not only do White people maintain a status quo when denying the role of color, race, and Whiteness, self-centered realities are created and posited. We make moral investments in the reproduction of our perception of the world, grounded in our perspective. This is reinforced

again and again when not challenged either internally or externally. The maneuvers that occur to implement this alternate view include evasion, reason, and mystifying solutions presented by others. In short, barriers are raised when Whiteness and the realities of disparities along racial lines are denied (Mueller, 2017).

This gets into the difference between acknowledgments and beliefs. For this context, belief should be defined as one's willingness to comprehend, understand, and accept information, as opposed to beliefs that are grounded in morals and values at their core. Thus, when one believes that there is no racial disparity in American society, and the way in their mind that this manifests in school is that students are not treated nor disciplined differently along racial lines, then they are not willing to acknowledge how color plays a role in disparities that exist. A correlation exists between these beliefs, this lack of acknowledgment, and evidence of discrimination (Talaska et al., 2008). Until White people acknowledge that choices, actions, and impact along racial lines are a manifestation of White fragility and ignorance, then defensiveness and blindness will result in reinforcement and deepening of the status quo. Deflection, alternate explanations, and shutting down the topic altogether are additional tactics that get used. Though, through various forms of addressing and attempting to build self-regulation, they can be owned and improved upon (Glazer & Liebow, 2021).

The concept of colorblind racism is built on four central frames including abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. While liberalism is used as a term to explain the challenging of norms, the frame of abstract liberalism is used as a means to import ideas that sound liberal and liberatory but instead create barriers to equity through vaguery. Concepts such as equal opportunity, increasing choice, and removing barriers are used as positive examples of creating pathways toward equal outcomes, when instead they only serve

to create new pathways to discrimination. Without truly addressing the de facto segregation that results from these liberal concepts, this masks racism with lacking substance and negative consequences for minoritized populations. In these examples, until the pathways are achieved through opportunities, choices, and removing barriers that lead to equitable outcomes, the racist status quo remains in place and masked. The next frame, naturalization, is when racism is explained away as a manifestation of natural occurrences. This happens when rationale centers around the way things are, affinity groups (ex. Self-segregation being suggested as natural), and similarities that emerge within racial groups being justified as preconditional versus relational. The third frame is cultural racism, relying on stereotypes and generalizations that are observed and attributed to all within a racial group. This is done as a blanket association rather than to individuals and reinforces tropes that are oftentimes derogatory, such as statements about work ethic, values, beliefs, and morals. These do not take into account the entire racialized history of oppression laid onto entire racial groups, and how that prevents the progress that may reduce the manifestation of these notions. Historically, this was grounded in biology, but as that has proven to be a fallacy and debunked, cultural associations have replaced this. Lastly, the fourth frame involves the minimization of racism. In situations in which it is acknowledged that differences exist in ways that impact racial groups differently, this happens when the extent to which it harms minoritized communities is diminished. Not only does this happen in ways that deflect from harm caused, it labels those who highlight these disparities as being overly sensitive, making excuses, or invoking race. An example of this is how a lack of racial diversity within a company signals racism, by deflecting and focusing on the availability of jobs across an economy. Elements of these four frames manifest in racist school cultures where racially disparate student discipline outcomes occur (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Deepening our understanding of these topics precedes and goes hand in hand with working towards a goal. If administrators have a clear understanding of the school's diversity goals and an appropriate discipline system is communicated to staff, then it is more likely that it will be communicated to staff. Then, bias can be noticed, and addressed as part of equitable goals (Tatum, 2017). Similarly, how teachers approach curriculum to challenge biases as a staff, collectively forces a continuation on engagement in discussions that focus on a goal, once established. But a goal cannot be appropriately established until the liberatory thinking is profound.

There needs to be an overarching conversation about how necessary and beneficial studying and teaching about diversity and issues of race can be, especially in diverse schools. This effort, for staff and students, should be mainstream and must be adopted by all adults. While some may resist the effort, denying the existence of the issue especially before or if issues of racism are not acknowledged by some, surveys of students, parents, and staff, as well as an audit completed by stakeholders may reveal these issues. Hawley (2008) recommends four types of conversations: Develop a shared understanding of the benefits and challenges of improving how students of color experience school, collaboratively identify effective practices for deepening relationships between individuals that transcend race, pinpoint resources you need to make all of these happen, and create processes for these to happen.

There is a need to acknowledge the needs of students. Deepening knowledge of these issues in conjunction with strategic action, collectively, will help ensure issues of racism in schools are comprehensively addressed (Tatum, 2017). How this is done effectively in majority-minority schools with mostly White teachers and White administrators as equitable discipline



outcomes are pursued is a unique challenge worthy of continual study as is the case in any school demographic setting.

It's important to spend time uncovering institutional biases that prevent inequitable outcomes. A vision of equity and the courage to be anti-racist leads to the recognition that unleashing the full potential of all children is within reach of any educator (Singleton, 2015). Deepening collective knowledge of these issues is an essential step that cannot be circumvented and something that looks different in any school culture. Thus, starting with principals and how thinking needs to change as well as how this unfolds for their staff is something that will be explored and implemented as part of a research study described later.

### ***Unacknowledged, Unchallenged Whiteness***

Whiteness is a form of property, akin to property that is visibly owned, such as real estate or other forms of equity. The difference is that Whiteness is largely invisible to White people. Policy needs to not only not protect the property (as defined above) interests of Whites but actively and knowingly undo the hierarchy of power (Harris, 1993). The historical power of Whiteness has a strong presence in schools. Powerblind, colorblind formal policies dominate schools, unless race and Whiteness are explicitly discussed. This is done specifically through policies and programs that claim to be diverse and differentiated based on student needs. But, created without respect for race, they cannot claim to address the inequities that arise in situations they are meant to address (Castagno, 2014). People of all races may struggle to have these conversations. The debates and critiques of the status quo oftentimes go “whispered” or unspoken. It can feel dangerous to people of all races to critique the work of the dominant class, especially when these people work together or have to continue to exist in the same community as colleagues or other forms (ex. parents and staff). There can also be worry that the critique, as

valid and grounded in a history of inequity as it may be, will be deflected or defended versus accepted and acknowledged (McManimon et al., 2018).

It helps paint the picture of how discrimination exists in largely unspoken ways in a profession where the majority of the teaching profession is White (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). In schools where the majority of teaching staff are White, and the majority of students are minoritized, the role of adult race and student race need to be inspected in the pursuit of eradicating the marginalization of these students. What are the implications of how students are treated in everyday interactions as well as in the behavior and discipline systems? Unless questions such as these are looked at through the research of Whiteness, they are being ignored. Ignorance inevitably maintains the status quo (Warren, 1999).

Shifting towards how a school leader works with their staff, a large hurdle is working with the staff who are also privileged due to race and have yet to acknowledge the depth at which implicit bias exists or something that motivates them to shift their mindset (Eberhardt, 2020). This building of new competence, as described by Evans (1996), is complex both cognitively and emotionally when it involves these deep concepts described above. As people fear loss, the loss can be equated to a form of grief. Processing grief involves time, personal contact, and a path forward.

The inequities described above persist due to the unwillingness, inability, or ignorance of people to change, resulting from a lack of awareness of the issue of how systemic racism manifests in schools. In many situations, those in power don't know what evidence-based research says about privilege. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Hamilton et al., 1961), Socrates describes a scenario in which a prisoner may get dragged from a cave into the sunlight, forced to face the blinding light, as the prisoner is freed from his chains. This, as Plato says, would take a

period of adjustment and stages of realization. Ultimately, this person would now have been exposed to and forced to face the realities that are now understood.

Those who work in education are educated in many pedagogical and managerial ways, but oftentimes not in the deep science of racial and cultural understanding about all students. Especially in schools and spaces where students come from rich, diverse places, this remains a growth area. Educators must be educated, by thinking through how educators and those to be educated are part of the same cyclical process if the education is co-created and reflexive (Freire, 1970). A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice co-intentional education. Teachers and students are critical in re-creating the knowledge that defines the reality in which we exist. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. Contextually, referencing how student discipline is managed, involves inspecting, revising, and re-imagining how policy is implemented. Educators must first examine their role in reproducing the current racial order. Self-criticism and inspection are critical to developing new educational practices and new understanding that seek to change the way things are (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2008).

### ***Critical Whiteness as an Underlying Framework***

A vital part of this research relies on Harris's (1993) theoretical framework of Whiteness, which asserts that in White-controlled institutions, the privilege of power and the right to afford meaning to policies and decisions are a form of property. As race is not a biological concept (Goodman, 2008), it is a form of privilege and power; a social and political tool. Though being White is a socially constructed status that Whites adopt, most Whites lack an understanding of

the concept of Whiteness as a tool of influence and a weapon of oppression (Leonardo, 2002). Leonardo (2002) advocates that Whites need to acknowledge and distinguish between White culture and Whiteness and that we need to challenge the reality that we know. This involves a revolt against Whiteness, a rejection of it as truth, and an acceptance of a reconstructed reality guided by non-White discourses. Treason and intentional acts of deconstruction are needed.

Whiteness is imported by White educators in particular, as members of the dominant group live in a dominant position while not abandoning practices that keep the racial order in place. Some attempt to address the roles they play in reproducing the current racial order, remembering that they work inside a racialized social structure and that athleticism is necessary to learn about our roles in reproducing the racial status quo, central to the process of developing new educational practices that can change it (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2008). In the context of schools where the majority of the staff are White (and even the non-White team, acting in a racialized, White-dominated workspace), it is essential to view all work through this lens. How the racialized, dominant status quo centered through our work daily? How can it be realized, reflected upon, and undone to recreate a new order where our marginalized students' voices are at the center?

One of Warren's (1999) central arguments for using Whiteness as a way to discuss the profession of education and the role of teachers working in a White-value-dominated place is to use it to invoke anti-racist challenges through critique and transformation. This transformation happens in Whiteness research when addressed by Whites through self-reflection, awakening, realization, and other acknowledgment forms. Regarding Whiteness, Harris states (1999):

It has blinded society to the systems of domination that work against so many by retaining an unvarying focus on vestiges of systemic racialized privilege that

subordinates those perceived as a particularized few - the "others." It has thwarted not only conceptions of racial justice but also conceptions of property that embrace more equitable possibilities. In protecting the property interest in Whiteness, the property is assumed to be no more than the right to prohibit infringement on settled expectations, ignoring countervailing equitable claims that are predicated on a right to inclusion. (p. 1791).

As a result, it cannot be assumed one way or another how influenced has been used in our approaches to education. Have teacher training programs, self-praxis development as educators, and philosophies about ability and brain development been colored? Has the dominant status influenced daily decisions? The answer to these questions is an undoubted yes. Has the research imported here regarding the role of trust, behavioral change, and school leadership been colored? It's likely, and cannot be assumed not, as there is no explicit mention of the role of race or Whiteness in the seminal works.

Thus, all foundational works in context are described below. Whiteness remains the predominant lens to ensure it respects the reality of the key actors' dominant role. A school leader looking to enact change must think through this lens or else be ignorant of the potentially dire implications their work may have without it. Feagin (2010) writes, "The system of White-imposed racism and its rationalizing has long been part of U.S. foundational realities, yet not one of the significant White theorists in the U.S. social science canon has substantially analyzed and understood well that major societal foundation (p. 15)." His bold claim about the lack of theorists who focus on this understanding of social foundations complements this study's intent to focus on theoretical frameworks and seminal works grounded in Whiteness and racial theory. To keep

diverse student bodies as the targeted audience, it is necessary to center the research through their lens.

### ***The Discomfort of Whiteness***

Understanding the racialized nature of the type of work in school, it's essential to think through a critical lens of race to ensure that the decisions we make collaboratively are respectful of our students' individualities. While acknowledging the importance of race, the influence of Whiteness in school leaders and a predominantly White staff must be central to the research. Through the lens of Whiteness, and the concept of being colormute,

The pursuit of equity requires an understanding of the historical, persistent, and structural nature of oppression and dominance. It is losing sight of history and context that results in a skewed— although the much nicer— perception of the problem. But it is exactly this nicely skewed perception that obscures Whiteness and hides the need for equality (Castagno, 2014, p. 110).

This work has great potential.

Though changing the beliefs of White school staff regarding their understanding and the resulting treatment of Black and Latinx students can shift their approach to student discipline practices, instructional strategies, and processes toward identifying disabilities, it also runs the risk of losing staff along the way. Disengagement, overwhelming feelings of guilt, accusations, and defensiveness about one's own beliefs linger as potential challenges to this realization process (Thompson, 2008). Consider White rage's potential through equitable situational advancements such as achievement by minority students. When priority or support is given to one race over another, it can spark a backlash. When a policy is crafted through the lens of what will impact Black and Latinx students to ensure they are not targeted for discipline, there will be

resistance or doubt amongst White staff who feel they have lost power or authority (Anderson, 2017).

To move beyond shifting the belief to impacting the action, it can be argued that implementation intention, developing into habits, and changes in practices by individuals and groups as dynamic changes. Over history, “Critical consciousness emerges from the effort to grasp that the given limits are not fated realities but obstacles and boundaries created in the course of human events” (Glass, 2008, p. 338). In this vision, justice emerges as a break from the social order, grounded in practitioners’ actions. Hope raises these efforts (supported by trust and training) to overcome situational limits and avoid discouraging societal factors beyond one’s control.

The leadership philosophy, leadership style, amount of training and preparation, the type, fidelity, efficacy, and commitment to achieving the mission should all be considered (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Issues of trust, lack of responsibility, and challenges of each school’s unique situations plague all adult relationships in pursuit of this mission, threatening to derail the efforts (Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014). Thus, the school leader’s role is political, and cultural, grounded in ethics, and hinges on trust and relationships with other adults (students). This ever-evolving adaptive and hard-to-define mission involves the collective ownership of all individuals as led by the school leader. This ensures the mission of social justice is widespread, commonly held, and achieved together (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Leadership in the context of social justice, “is about developing learning networks and partnerships premised upon trust and reciprocity between schools, communities, and among individuals” (Blackmore, 2002, p. 219).

### ***The Use of Critical Race Theory***

Centering race, Stovall (2009) states that we must “Declare the intersection of disciplines in Critical Race Theory (CRT) as necessary to the development of new approaches” (p. 260). A framework for using CRT as a community-centered praxis foregrounds race in the research process and challenges traditional research paradigms that frame and explain the experiences of students of color. It offers a liberatory or transformative solution to the issues presented, views the experiences faced by these students as qualities that are strengths, and relies on the research base of similar research that is grounded in communities of color to validate, support, and further the research being completed. This serves as the foundation for which any future study should take place. Our students of color need to be understood, valued, and have policies created that respect their true selves. However, if the research itself is done from the perspective of how the beliefs, mindsets, attitudes, actions, and policies implemented by White staff impact these students, Critical Whiteness will be used. Knowing that policy alone is not a solution when the implementation of policy can serve to further or at least sustain inequities, social justice leadership in the interactions among adults does serve as a framework that incorporates CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

### ***Resistance to Mindset Change***

Following the deepening of the awareness of these issues in each of us is the necessity to change one’s mindset. One of the necessary steps for transformational change is self-examination likely involving guilt or shame (Mezirow, 1997). Though everyone has their forms of intrinsic motivation, some themes appear across society. When considering privilege, and the fact that this exists disproportionately for Whites due to both institutionalized racism and generational wealth, the challenge faced is overcoming the fear of loss, rather than change



(Heifetz, 1994). In schools, this can look like cognitive dissonance that serves as a disconnect between the espoused culturally diverse inclusive environments that reflect our students and the realities of what is presented by teachers. When teachers make decisions, choosing a curriculum and classroom expectations based on their own deeply held beliefs and backgrounds, this is likely going to feel divided from those of a racially diverse class of students (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001).

A change theory model that needs to take place is called “unfreezing” from the status quo, to become willing to change. If done effectively, this causes radical change, minimizes disruption from the intended process or operations, and formalizes the new path as permanent (Lewin, 1947). *Mastery experiences* are a process for truly developing an understanding of a concept, but underlying the learning itself is a reliance on commitment and buy-in to change beliefs. This must come before experimentation and implementation (Forman et al., 2017). A framework for this involves the concept of psychological safety as a necessary condition for unfreezing (Schein, 1996). Fear, loathing, and threats of different kinds can prevent the change from occurring.

Change can be described as a social process within organizations, as it involves both educational and structural components. This can also be listed as a stable quasi-stationary equilibrium, similar to a river rather than a stationary object, as something in motion but typically moving in one direction with the flow. When a change is needed, it’s comparable to a change in the velocity or direction of that river. The potential of increasing the strength of the opposing forces to the river, resulting in a rise in tension, or degree of conflict, shifts behaviors of group dynamics. Another way to look at this is that one can potentially shift the flow of the river to a new direction intentionally by adding forces in the newly desired direction and

diminishing forces in opposing directions. A river flowing downstream can shift to a new direction, intentionally or unintentionally, when there is resistance to the current direction and forces pushing it into a new direction. Counterforces can be described as resistance and barriers in the path discussed above. Consider how group dynamics operate under this system. People typically don't stray far from the norms of group behaviors, and they are similarly influenced by group preferences, commitments, and goals. This is a powerful level when the group commits to change, but a barrier when change is not happening (Lewin, 1947).

The process of cognitive restructuring or reframing is necessary for self-actualization, mindset shifting, and internal changing of beliefs is similar (Schein, 1996). How this occurs is through one of three mediums: semantic redefinition where a new definition of a term is revealed, cognitive broadening as we learn a more broad and widespread impact of a concept, or new standards of judgment or evaluation where we adjust our anchor of judgment by realizing that they are not static nor absolute. In a group structure, an impetus for change comes from new information, the relation of individuals to a group, and how the group perceives this information as either positive or negative. This new information can either be delivered (ex. Planned training) or found by scanning the environment in the hopes of finding something new.

Reform should instead be built on a platform of trust and consensus. This trust begins with the formal leader but extends beyond this to other critical factors. Still, without it, a change initiative is almost certain to fail (Evans, 1996). None of us follow people we don't trust unless forced. Instead, team commitments, honor codes, social peer pressure, and reliance on one another help establish accountability for trust, which builds upon itself bit by bit (Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991). Trust can be defined in different ways. One definition involves the concept of trust having two prongs: values and skill. A typical scenario of this is where formal leaders are

expected to exhibit predictability, through consistency (Heifetz, 1994). Another way to define trust is by referencing it as integrity, honesty, and openness, as participants strive to know the concerns, motivators, and necessary conditions for those around them (teammates or employees, for example) to operate (Sosik and Dionne, 1997). Similarly, trust can be defined as being centered around motive and ability: you can trust someone to follow through (motive) if they have the know-how (ability) to do so, as an “honest broker” (Patterson et al., 2012; Sinek, 2014).

Four key elements of trust, from a standpoint of leadership, involve respect for one’s role in producing high-quality results, belief in another’s ability and willingness to fulfill duties, caring personally for one another, and consistency between what is stated and what is done (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). When considering the concept of trust as part of a concept of sustainable leadership, trust can be defined through three formations: contractual, competence, and communication. These first two relate most directly to Patterson’s (2002) definition, of motive and ability, at least in situations where it is obligated, whereas the third is more interpersonal and relates to the shifting variances of trust that exist due to the myriad factors this involves. Communication should be clear, high-quality, open, frequent, honest (including the admission of mistakes), and confidence-maintaining when necessary (Reina and Reina, 2006).

*A holding environment* can denote the fragile situation by which a leader must maintain the relationship they have with a staff member, at least part of which they do through their situational power. They hold the attention of the other party and facilitate adaptive work. Coaches, pastors, politicians, supervisors, and others in formal or informal leadership roles all are afforded these opportunities. This environment, when used effectively, regulates the stress caused by work. In schools, in regards to the work of a collective staff working towards reducing

the racial discipline gap, this involves collective efficacy in which staff is adding value to the work of one another, without suspicion, wondering, or mistrust disrupting the flow of the work (Heifetz, 1994).

### *Necessary components in shifting staff mindsets related to student discipline*

Students are dependent upon one another to achieve desired results. Structural dependency creates vulnerability and affects all interpersonal relationships. School staff is constantly interpreting the intentions embedded in the actions of others. These discernments take into account their history with one another. This history of interactions is a necessary component of the concept of trust. Relational trust develops in day-to-day interactions, and thus increasing trust and outcomes are interrelated. Unfortunately, the converse is also true, and thus trust is intertwined with the actions of all adults (Bryk, 2010). What is the desired outcome for a school leader hoping to build trust towards a greater goal of collaboration, and commitment, towards the pursuit of addressing systemic disproportionate racial student discipline outcomes? First, build trust. This above all else must be the goal. This in and of itself is quite complicated: Should a leader make expectations clear up front, or wait to listen to the needs of the school, and state expectations later, risking seeming like they waft with the times? What happens when the priorities of different stakeholders compete with one another and must be reconciled? How is trust impacted when one group feels let down? What landmines exist in the histories of a school culture that must be avoided, and of course, learned about by a leader? How can a leader wait to address the issues, when there is an urgency and a moral imperative to address work that needs to be done or it will harm children if left unaddressed? Unfortunately, for anything positive to work (unless ruling as a brute authoritarian), trust comes first.

Without a genuine discourse about real issues on which to focus and a lack of commitment around synthesized priorities, and a lack of integrity in one's ability to follow through on intentions, distrust develops and role expectations are misaligned. In the end, even actions that many would see as reasonable run the risk of being viewed as suspect. Therefore, none of the important work that is to be accomplished through a mission of race and equitable student discipline outcomes is likely when trust is low and runs the risk of being derailed (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). When trust is low in schools, the high-quality results desired by all stakeholders are more difficult to achieve. It's not hard to notice how and which of the basic tenets of trust may not be in place, depending on who is asked. A lack of coherence and shared understanding of the mission and values (beyond what is stated, rather, what is believed and lived), is one potential element (Forman et al., 2017). When thinking through, for example, how certain staff in this setting may feel that they are not respected (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Others may not believe in the competence of colleagues or their leadership, to enact the change that is needed, follow through on commitments, and hold or be held accountable in some form. This leads to a lack of consistency between what is expected and what happens. All factors can breed a low-trust environment, and thus, may contribute to the status quo in settings such as this. The necessity of a mutual purpose of an ethical imperative related to improving student discipline outcomes is a way to motivate teachers to change (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

To rally around a school's plan for improving racial student discipline outcomes, the concept of commitment can be explained further. Commitment is predicated on strong trust and a healthy dose of professional conflict, and involves buy-in to a mission and clarity as to what is expected (Lencioni & Stransky, 2002). The buy-in within an organization involves the opposite of consensus. Whereas consensus may involve the laborious task of gaining support for a

mission and getting a critical mass of nearly all adults to agree to a specific decision because they agree with it, commitment expects that while people disagree, they must make choose the end. This choice once agreed upon becomes the commitment. As trust underlies this concept, the aspect of clarity ensures that a clearly defined stated purpose of the mission will unfold. Commitment involves buy-in. As stated above with a mutual purpose and shared vision, buy-in involves alignment and coherence (Forman et al., 2017).

### **Perception of the Problem by Teachers**

As it relates to discipline in particular, it's essential to acknowledge, discuss, and confront deficit thinking research and trends, and how this manifests in school. We must reflect on our historic relationship with families, and what we've done to truly understand the histories, stories, and values of those we serve. We must strive to ensure that our capacity to address issues is not limited merely to what is in our current repertoire, but is furthered by what is needed to truly address gaps. Building authentic and knowledgeable relationships, as well as interrogating and revising policies and practices are necessary steps in truly changing how we care for our students. It's important to highlight the importance of acknowledging racism and marginalization in the planning and implementation of practices. Beyond acknowledging, being in a role in which school leaders can directly impact student discipline outcomes our students face despite societal factors beyond our control, we must take explicit steps that respect the rights and needs of our students (DeMatthews, 2016; Valencia, 2010).

Teachers, especially those who are White, who agree to work in diverse schools typically don't want to be viewed as racist. They believe in their hearts that they are either not racist or are non-acknowledging of race in their vernacular. The problem is that many staff only know of racism as an overtly observable situation and they have not been educated on the realities of

covert racism that permeates society in myriad ways. This is especially true for staff who have yet to acknowledge the realness of Whiteness, privilege, or disparities based on race which intersects. Trusted formal and informal leaders can be charged with leading staff to address inequities through targeted actions. The mutual purpose, once covert racism and bias are acknowledged, is to address them directly and eradicate them, while helping solve education debts and disparities around discipline data that are divided by race. Educating constituents helps the learner to see that their mutual purpose is a more morally vital one, as part of a social justice mission. Thus, a process of social justice regarding student discipline in schools involves developing an understanding of biased systems and structures. This mindset shift is needed while fostering and maintaining trust, teamwork, and commitment in a profession where teachers and school leaders are tasked with expectations that exceed what they were trained to do in preservice programs (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). It's a daunting task for sure.

### **Culturally Responsive School Leaders**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership focuses on the actions, beliefs, and adaptiveness of the leaders in the schools as one of its central tenets (Khalifa et al., 2016). This can be described as a critical consciousness, in which the school leader them self, as well as all those who support students, reflect and look inward to one's impact on student behavioral outcomes in this context. This includes school programs, departmental and school-wide structures, hiring and professional development practices, and anything else that results in disparities along racial or cultural lines. Only once these are critiqued by the leader and all others, by looking inward to their impact as well as the impact of others and how we can affect change, will we see that we all have a role in either reproducing or disrupting the status quo. Without that, change will not occur (Khalifa et al., 2016; Durden et al., 2016).

All leaders and all adults have privileges over students. It's inherent in the structure of schooling that acknowledging the status quo of adultism, systemic structures in schooling itself, and the reproduction of the same inadequate outcomes are things that can be easily noticed. This can be a starting point for critical consciousness, as they are things that all school staff have in common as a privilege that students do not have. We all hold the key levers to change, in ways that students do not control. If the other factors described in this paper are in place, then the courage to push past the current status in ways that challenge norms can manifest (Saunders, 2022, Lustick, 2017).

### **Culturally Responsive Student Voice**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership encourages the centering of student voices, especially those who are most impacted by disparate and discriminatory school practices. When determining content, policy, and practices, how are the epistemologies, cultures, perspectives, and feedback of students considered at all stages of development? The framework highlights this as a way to respond to the needs of students. This can be mapped into any situation, such as when the curriculum is developed in ways that start with and leverages the prior knowledge and collective knowledge inherent in the lived experiences of students instead of starting from a point of what textbook publishers choose to present. Teachers designing curricula using standards and then getting input from students about what impacts their lives and would help them be empowered to learn, grow, and affect change is a more responsive approach than starting from textbooks that were not developed in consultation with students. Similarly, a discipline policy that evolves in conjunction with a rotating panel of students that helps make edits with equitable and positive goals in mind helps keep students at the forefront of not only the conversation but of the dialogues themselves (Sharma & Christ, 2017).



## **Culturally Responsive Inclusive Spaces**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership demands that schools are inclusive in practice, and not just in the policy. The most obvious and relevant example of this stance exists in tandem with this research, as it pertains to exclusionary discipline policies. Policies that actively push students out of school will not make them feel included, even when done with the perception of keeping a school safe and welcoming for those who choose to follow the established rules. All members of the community should feel welcomed and safe, and when some do not, the whole structure begins to crumble. Students need to feel a sense of fairness and justice, as part of an overall sense of feeling truly included and respected for their worth. This fairness can be along racial lines, when comparing how students of different racial backgrounds may be perceived to have been treated differently especially when exhibiting the same behaviors, and also within identity groups as certain students are singled out over others. Students should not feel they are being targeted or intimidated (Carter et al., 2022).

Consider the discipline policies themselves. Any time a student is suspended, they are excluded. That's a simple reality. To the greatest extent possible, avoiding exclusion leads to inclusivity. Surveying and hosting focus groups and leaning in on specific case studies of situations to determine why students miss school or choose to violate rules and cause harm helps identify why they may not feel included or why they make choices that leave them excluded. Still, when students are given a consequence, there is a critical moment when they could either be pushed away or pulled closer. A system and set of structures in which students are given an alternative to the exclusion that involves a strong and established process for building buy-in lead directly to inclusivity in the moment of the activity as well as increasing the likelihood of ongoing inclusiveness in the future of the school's culture. Concrete examples of this include not

only suspension or expulsion, but also zero-tolerance policies for specific behaviors, dealing with making of allowing for opt-out or work-avoidant behaviors in exchange for a reduced consequence, or worst, involvement of law enforcement for violation of school policies (Khalifa, 2020). These policies need not be overtly racist in writing their attempt at being written fairly and objectively can mask the disproportionate impact that they have (Lustick, 2017).

Going deeper, exclusivity from a holistic school culture can also involve psychological factors. Curricula that do not include the stories of people who raised our students do not include their identity. Staff who have yet to reflect and learn from their own biases and who do not actively incorporate the identities of students into their interactions, relationships, and choices of words will leave students feeling as if their teachers do not have their true interests in mind. Hostility, punitive grading policies, hyper-focusing on their behaviors, not acting with grace and understanding when expectations are not met, calling students out in front of the class, or lowering expectations in comparison to peers are more overt examples of exclusive practices that can be identified by students. This can also be defined as a participatory worldview, as it relates to wellbeing, where these stakeholders are part of the research. In this context, the research is involved in the design of a fair and equitable student discipline policy and structures, and the stakeholders are the students who are directly impacted (Yap & Yu, 2016).

### **Culturally Responsive Communal Funds of Knowledge**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership relies on not only the whole child, but the whole community to truly understand and know how to incorporate the culture of students. As students present themselves in school, we see what they choose to share with us. By expanding our horizons to all aspects of their lives, we know their true selves. This involves knowing the depth and breadth of the community, whether that be a few city blocks or miles of distance that it

takes for students to travel, as well as their entire identity and all that entails including race, gender, income, abilities, and more. Only when all aspects of what makes a community whole have been considered do we know that we have figured out how to be relevant to our students.

Schools are institutions, and as such, have power structures and existing practices for leadership from administration to teachers to families. These can either be inclusive and welcoming of a variety of diverse perspectives, or they can serve to perpetuate a status quo. When the existing culture in a school reproduces disparate outcomes, a lack of change will do no good. Thus, embracing social capital in all forms and establishing a culture of having all stakeholders involved in decision-making is key.

Envision a school in which, from all community voices, it's acknowledged that everyone brings something to the community that others cannot provide. School leaders take a school-wide approach, while teachers and additional staff think and act from their respective roles within the school; families play an invaluable role as both the first teacher of their children and of someone who adds their own family's legacy and support from outside of the school to the equation. Only when we can collectively acknowledge that all pillars of this structure support the overall development of a more dynamic and equitable school will we succeed and see a change in outcomes.

### **Political Context of Culturally Responsive School Leadership**

Related to, but largely explicitly absent from Khalifa's framework are the surrounding political aspects of Culturally Responsive School Leadership. In Horsford et al.'s (2011) references, the term relevant is used in replacement of responsive, so it's used that way here. This is centered around competing values, ideologies, and perspectives in all contexts and from all stakeholders. Administrators need to determine where to place their time and energy to make

an impact, and the related factors of resistance that build up in politics are critical (Clayton, 2011). This relates to policies and procedures, and the politics of power that determine how they are interpreted, implemented and resisted (English & Ellison, 2017). Considering how politics are a factor in nearly all aspects of school leadership, it can't be ignored as a factor of the framework (Bolman and Deal, 2018).

### **What is Missing from the Research**

The existing research on shifting mindsets and building trust does not write through a lens of Critical Race nor Critical Whiteness. As such, as well-intentioned as the research may have been, it was not done in a way that analyzes the contextual situations in which they lie through how they impact and are impacted by race. Only by centering their writings around race can we ensure that they are applicable and what their impact will be. Thus, to avoid the prejudice and assumptions made when research is both being completed and utilized in practice, it is necessary for research such as this to take place. The research on trust and shifting mindsets can be applied in a way that confirms the role they play in closing behavioral consequence gaps.

Intersecting interests of Critical Race, Critical Whiteness, school leadership, and framing is also lacking. Culturally responsive school leadership can be applied to school leadership, as it applies to leaders in majority racial minority schools. The research, utilizing observations and interviews, reveals a deeply rooted bias grounded in Whiteness. The conclusion is that this is very limiting to creating racial equity in different aspects of schooling. This topic would benefit from further research on the culturally responsive school leadership frame manifests in school leadership and how it prevents equitable outcomes. Additionally, becoming racially literate as school leaders and staff can lead to a critical consciousness (Toure & Dorsey, 2018). Especially when considering White staff and school leaders, a disconnect between prior knowledge on any

topic including expected behaviors exists when students are of a different race (Sleeter, 2001). Still, how leaders implement leadership practices that shift mindsets and actions is an area in need of further investigation. There still exists a gap between what is understood about what effectively addresses and reduces the racial discipline gap and the status quo. Further research on what works would benefit school leaders as they design professional learning to target system and situational attitudes, beliefs, and practices that disproportionately discriminate against Black students (King & McTier, 2015). Specifically, research is needed on the causal link between the theories and beliefs held by teachers and their frequency in utilizing discipline referrals and what professional development for teachers will help them break this connection (Gregory et al., 2010). Administrators are social change agents in schools, and how they lead change specifically in reducing the racial discipline gap is critical to creating equitable outcomes (Williams et al., 2020). Efficacy and impact are not evident in the current research, and a future study gathering effective practices from school leaders who have successfully reduced the racial discipline gap would help add to the body of research on this topic (Brown & Williams, 2015).

### **Contribution to the Research**

Further research on school leaders who have successfully developed racial literacy in teachers would contribute to an approach to school leadership that is culturally responsive (Davison, 2019). Additionally, continued research into the knowledge that school leaders bring to their practice in schools that are predominantly of minoritized racial backgrounds is also warranted (Toure & Dorsey, 2018). Developing a deeper understanding of how school leaders discover, develop, and understand the research and best practices while disseminating this knowledge and the opportunity to learn within their communities is key (Sakho et al., 2015).

As has been stated above, exclusionary practices do not result in a change in student behavior. While they exclude students, they perpetuate a racist status quo of pushing out those who need to support the most due to societal discrimination that cannot be addressed when the student is not present. Looking at who these students are, by calling out the disproportionate impact that these policies have on students of color, helps keep the research focused on solving these gaps. Rethinking the term *discipline* to be one of teaching and skill-building helps reframe the situation. In a social curriculum that is grounded in values and expectations before rules are formally enforced, the learning of the expectations and why should not be taken for granted. Students may not come to school willingly adopting these beliefs as their own. They need to be explicitly embraced and taught, and their voice needs to be valued. There are a variety of models of how this support system is taught in schools, including the expectation that social competency skills are taught, and punitive consequences are only assigned when the teaching has been effective yet behaviors persist. Even then, loss of instructional time is a last-resort consequence. Gaps cannot be closed when the student is not even in attendance. This is one of many research-based processes that can impact disproportionate discipline practices. Underlying these gaps is how they are situated amongst other policies in and around schools, and thus do not present a solution in and of themselves unless the adults are implementing it (Skiba and Peterson, 1997).

In a study in which school leaders share their efforts through interviews, the direct impact of this work will be seen in the empirical writing of a dissertation. This research can then be not only applied by the researcher in the context of the school but also used as a part of the body of research on what works in schools. Additionally, it adds to a scant body of research that merges Whiteness, race, behavioral change of adults, and trust. Our students deserve our best, and a mission of social justice that aspires to help close achievement and behavioral gaps for students

disproportionately affected by societal inequities is what's needed for their benefit. As school leaders, practitioners, and researchers, we are uniquely positioned to have a direct impact.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

As stated earlier, the research questions that drive this research are:

1. What school leadership practices enacted by Chicago Public Schools elementary school principals resulted in the reduction of Black student suspensions?
2. In what ways were the teachers engaged to show evidence of the reduction of Black student suspensions?

The more these stories of success are shared widely, and themes are exposed, the more that school leaders can avoid the pitfalls that create barriers preventing initiatives that move towards racial equity in student discipline from being implemented. Considering that the work done in schools is largely adaptive to the situation and unique to the dynamics of each school setting, the technical components of systems and structures are not sufficient. Taking into account the social and relational dynamics of how to see improvement in student discipline data is the goal, and inspecting the process from every aspect is key.

In this chapter, I introduce the study that was conducted, the methods by which data was collected, what affects the research from my role as researcher, how data was analyzed, and how this research will contribute to the body of research. I am hopeful that this will help deepen the landscape of what is known about how to reduce the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Knowing that effective practices exist, capturing these, and sharing them, means that others can learn from what's working.

### **Research Paradigm and Design**

The research paradigm appropriate for this research would be interpretivism. Interpretivism holds that the researcher seeks to understand the perspective and definition of a problem from those most directly involved, as opposed to a universal truth about a matter. In



interpretivism research, there is no predetermined hypothesis to reject or prove, but rather data to gather from those who experienced a phenomenon. Their stories and experiences help create the data that is used throughout the study (Soganci, 2013). In this study, participants make sense of the phenomenon that is the work that has been done in their school setting. Ultimately, the meaning of the process by which student discipline outcomes and staff mindsets are impacted is determined by the participants.

It is assumed that there is no singular truth nor can reality be verified in data. While the outcomes of quantifiable data can be verified in the schools that serve as research settings for this study, their process of learning, reflection, conflict, discussion, and the role of relationships, community, and trust is open to the perspective of those telling their truths. These perspectives will vary from person to person, and evidence will be collected from the interviews. There will likely be conflict, contradiction, and a variety of approaches that will be synthesized from disparate interviews, due to the uniqueness of each research setting.

This approach is thus wholly interpretivist, as it seeks to give meaning to responses given by principals who have proven to successfully reduce the racial discipline gap. The interpretation of what has occurred in the local setting is particular to each school and shared directly by those involved (Soganci, 2013). Thus, it's important to determine in an interpretivist approach, what to do with the data gathered. Description, analysis, and interpretation are all interrelated, Developing meaning is cyclical, inter-relational, and dialectic (Agar, 1996). Data here is being constructed, albeit not co-constructed, as a form of passing on one form of interpretation to the reader (Wolcott, 1994).

This study implements the research method of phenomenology, as it involves the direct experience of participants. It investigates someone's experience during a particular period. In this

study, the experience of school leaders and the conditions surrounding their efforts to enact change in their schools that reduces the number of Black student suspensions was studied. As people are relational, how change occurs in schools is a result of these interpersonal interactions, and thus the phenomenology of what transpired gives rise to the research valuable to this study (Throop et al., 2021).

### **Research Methods**

The intersection of how student discipline should be handled equitably in schools and the ability of a leader to help staff in majority-minority schools to shift beliefs is the focal point of this research. The depth of this topic is that for discipline to truly be handled equitably, it takes a comprehensive knowledge of the systemic nature of racism, a cultural understanding of students of different racial backgrounds, as well as many interpersonal factors such as trust, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships as part of a social justice mission. The area of the study explored in this research determined how school leaders perceive they have effectively addressed these deep and systemic issues in urban schools, to determine what pathways towards a more equitable school can be developed. The authentic voice of the school leader, contextualized in their community, is key. While a meta-analysis or other form of quantitative analysis of what works may be valuable on a large scale, a study that digs into the specifics of these types of issues in schools with demographics similar to one another would be most valuable and relevant, hence the application of qualitative methods in this study.

Varying definitions of racism and myriad levels of understanding of how systemic racism manifests in school cloud the ability of school staff to have a cohesive conversation about this concept. When focusing on how student discipline is handled, ignorance of how racism manifests in this context ensures a status quo where students of color are disproportionately

disciplined for similar infractions (Skiba et al., 2011) will go unaddressed. Racial prejudice and implicit bias (Benson and Fiarman, 2020) are complicated concepts. It is no wonder that staff who do not consider themselves racist struggle to make sense of how racism exists in school systems and structures. The relations between different theories of racial disparities can be inconclusive and difficult to understand. There is no integrative research model that incorporates all of the components proposed by these theories (Gawronski et al., 2008). Clarification, coherence, and alignment of efforts are key to getting a school staff to understand and coordinate discussions and planning around equitable student discipline outcomes, similar to other school priorities (Forman et al., 2017). This mutual purpose is something that guides the direction of the work, creating a common language and alignment across the school. The use of interviews aims to draw upon these experiences.

Interviews being a form of qualitative research, the essence of the experience as shared by participants in this study is central to finding meaning in the data. All data is valid, and laid out, for inspection later in the process. The making of meaning is central to the concept of qualitative research, and the primary definition of how this process is utilized in interviews. Meaning is interpreted, following the interview process itself. Qualitative research is a broad field, and it is necessary to explain in more specificity that this research involves phenomenology and interpretivism as parts of the interview process within the research methods of this study (Merriam, 2002).

### **Research Setting and Context**

This research took place in the large urban school district of Chicago Public Schools. I discovered the pool of administrators who qualify based on their effectiveness at reducing the number of Black student suspensions by at least 20% over two years, by finding up to 25 to

interview based on these qualifying criteria. For the period of the data in which I identified which school leaders to interview, entered by the school leaders themselves into the district's data collection system, the district at the time had approximately 341,382 students, of whom racially 46.7% were Latinx, 35.8% were Black, 11% were White, 4.4% were Asian, .3% were Native American, and .2% were Pacific Islander (Students at Chicago Public Schools, 2021). The district has seen declining enrollment over the past decade and saw a massive school closure in 2013 which 46,000 students were affected by displacement either by being displaced or by attending schools receiving students from other schools that had been closed. Of these students, 88% were Black, adding a layer of complexity to the expectations for strong school cultures that would lead to positive behavioral expectations as related to the racial discipline gap (Ewing, 2018).

As can be found in many urban districts, the intersections of race and disproportionate outcomes can be found in Chicago in many spaces. Chicago as a city has pockets of racial trends, with over 140 schools in Chicago Public Schools having almost entirely a Black student population with no White students (Chicago Public Schools: Demographics, 2022). Chicago has not been under a federal desegregation decree since it was removed in 2009 (United States of America v. Chicago Public Schools, 2009). Unfortunately, segregation still exists across the city, and racial integration of schools, now no longer having criteria based on race since 2009, has stalled in some spaces. Most notably, the district's most selective schools have become more racially segregated over the past two decades. As a result, discrimination against Black students looks different in schools of all kinds. A Black student who is part of a very small minority within a school may not be fully integrated into the school's culture and how behavior is managed, and thus may be more likely to be disciplined due to not fitting in with expectations. In

a school that is almost entirely Black, it's more likely at the high school level to have a police presence (Karp, 2021), thus an increased likelihood that behavioral infractions will involve law enforcement on site.

Chicago Public Schools has taken active steps in the past decade to address the racial discipline gap, and significant progress has been made. Most notably, the implementation of SB100 in 2015 resulted in a massive overhaul of the Student Code of Conduct annually, eventually resulting in the Students' Rights and Responsibilities (Illinois Principals Association, 2015). As of 2017, 70% of suspensions in CPS went to Black students, whereas this group of students only represented 38% of the district at the time. In 2018, CPS implemented the Office of Student Protections and Title IX, and the Office of Equity. Though the pandemic disrupted how schools were run over the past two years, the mission of reducing suspensions and other forms of school exclusion remains in place, while the district's mission statements revolve around student success. To measure the impact of these various structures being put in place can be a challenge, one important point of note is that the district saw a 52.2% drop in suspensions from the 2014-2015 school year (the year before SB 100 was first implemented) to the end of the 2018-2019 school year, while the district overall only saw an 8.6% decline in enrollment. Though publicly available data does not show a racial breakdown of this data, with 36.6% of the district's students identifying as Black in 2019, it's likely that reductions in the overall number of suspensions occurred. Still, reducing the gap along racial lines remains the goal, which any school leader can track and address locally.

### **Consideration of Possible Ethical Issues**

Considering America in 2022 is a very politicized space regarding race, any research done on social topics is subject to ethical scrutiny. Adding to this the ethical consideration of

interviews, in which both the questions and the interpretation and selection of what is considered to be valued from answers is up to the researcher, there is room for misuse of data for purposes of the interviewer that are not objective. As part of this ethical consideration, it was important to anticipate what may be missed or overlooked by either the interviewer or interviewee. For example, when questions are asked, assuring to the greatest extent possible that answers reflect the truest form of an account of history is essential. Thus, when questions are developed as part of this research study, this was done so through a lens of getting answers that represent a comprehensive look at how school improvement efforts that led to the reduction of the racial discipline gap have been achieved by looking at all aspects of school (Merriam, 2002).

When administrators agreed to participate, they were asked to sign a written informed consent form. Then, the interview was administered. I read the items out for the participants, then gave them time to state the most appropriate answer according to their situation.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My identity as a cis-gender heterosexual White male serves as a personal lens by which to acknowledge how my research is viewed when writing. Additionally, being raised in an upper-middle-class community and fully able-bodied, it is important to note that none of the traditionally listed forms of discrimination are affecting me as a researcher, personally. Thus, I do not personally relate to the lived experience of students who have faced discrimination nor do I have personal experience feeling discriminated against for other forms of identity. This is acknowledged at the onset of my research. Still, the identity of my research subjects being school leaders is oftentimes very similar to my own since it varies school by school. School leaders in Chicago are from a multitude of different racial and gendered backgrounds.

First, I reflect on my motivations and intentions. Though I do not feel discriminated against personally in my upbringing based on my identity, I starkly saw an inequitable world and felt compelled to address these disparities. Then, my journey in my doctoral program helped teach me to think critically about the world, at which point I began to develop a deeper understanding of how and why inequities exist, arming me with skills by which to research and then address the unfairness of the world. So, while not personal to my lived experience, this research journey is personal to my journey as a learner who has always followed my passion to teach and raise healthy, successful students (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019).

My journey, in brief, involves reflection on my lived experience as a young educator moving from one community to another, acknowledging how bias has been part of me all along and how I must still have more to learn. My ability to take advantage of opportunities that helped me get into a role where I could use formal and informal leadership roles to impact outcomes was thanks to individuals who helped present me with access. As a White male raised in a racially diverse (mostly White, Asian, and middle eastern Chaldean) yet socioeconomically upper-middle-class community, who attended a college that was private and 90% White and upper-middle-class, my intrinsic motivation was not truly enacted until I entered the teaching profession in South Carolina and taught in a school and community that I saw racism overtly displayed. My Black students disproportionately came from lower-income households than their White peers, and I knew that these students did not have the same opportunities that I did as a child.

My thinking on these concepts has changed over time through my successes and struggles as a leader. As I think through the theoretical lens by which I have written, I contextualize some of my work on myself as a unique person, but also slightly more broadly as a

White male in the formal leadership role of the principal in a school that is made up of a majority of marginalized students with a half White staff. Since I started my career as a teacher in a space where I taught students who did not look like me as predominantly Black and nearly all of a lower-income status than that in which I was raised, it was my first experience being in a role where I was both directly aware of the inequities of society and formally empowered with a title in which I could enact change. At the time, I was a music teacher teaching roughly 100 students through band and piano classes. My knowledge was limited to a few key authors on issues such as understanding poverty who have since been debunked (Castagno, 2014), and my own contextual and anecdotal research through both a master's degree in which I documented my teaching process and my relationship building with my students. Still, in this capacity, my only influence on the behavior of other adults was limited to friendships, interpersonal professional relationships, and my personal beliefs about equity without formal training.

After joining various leadership programs and navigating through the established and hidden curricula, my belief structures changed as I began to import and accept the knowledge that reinforced what I knew to be societal inequities, wicked and adaptive problems (Grint, 2005) that are challenging to solve, and how leaders come in the form of formal and informal roles. I learned about social justice leadership at this time, but not through the lens of Critical Race Theory (Stovall, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It was not until joining the New Leaders program, which was led predominantly by social justice school leaders with a track record of school turnaround success who were predominantly mentors and leaders of color, that I began to hear advice and receive training that is both culturally responsive and led through an authentic lens of racial justice. This was enhanced through formal educational means by joining a doctoral program that helped make evident the frameworks of both Critical Race Theory and Critical



Whiteness (Harris, 1993). Seeing scholarly research that not only identifies and builds an understanding of these concepts but also helps one shine a spotlight on other aspects of society through this same lens has been transformative for my mindsets, beliefs, and directions as a leader.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of this research. Though the questions and the data collection methods were the same, the school settings were all unique to each school site. Thus, each interview felt unique and therefore served as a story of the school site itself. All interviews were conducted in the winter of the 2022-23 school year via Zoom. Regardless, the structure and method collection was consistent across all settings. With eight interviews that were implemented, it's important to note that the schools and thus the interviews looked different at each site.

The structure of interviews is one that is varied and had many sub-contexts, such as the use of interviews as a one-time recollection of incidents versus one's recollection of multiple events or multiple points of reflection over time of various incidents. Either way, there were effective methods employed by others that helped gather data for usage in analysis (Jenkins et al., 2010). The aim of this type of interviewing is to benefit Black elementary school students. The agenda here involves a path toward healing not in the interview, but in the outcomes achieved which will be added to the body of research on the topic (Roulston, 2010).

Below is an exploration of topics related to how data was collected, diving into the complexity of characteristics that impact the effectiveness of this method. It's important to account for all of these factors throughout the research process. The goal is to remain non-

judgmental, sensitive, and respectful to the respondent as a point of departure before encountering other forms of biases that may emerge (Merriam, 2002).

As described above, a series of interviews with school leaders who have addressed these problems allowed school leaders to espouse their experience. These interviews were coded, analyzed, labeled, and tagged, and themes were identified. The themes referenced the existing research to determine if and how the theory turned into praxis and what impact resulted. The results provide a body of research that does not currently exist in robust ways: a connection between the influence of Whiteness on leadership, the influence of Whiteness on staff, teaching predominantly students of color, and the role of trust and shifting mindsets as they address issues of social justice as listed above. As none of this research nor the prior work done in these schools has existed in a vacuum, there is subjectivity, interpretation, and positionality bias that can cloud the reports of the interviewee. Still, the interview transcript was captured, coded, and tagged, as themes were identified. The anonymity of interviewees could be maintained by the readers.

During the interviews, I asked the questions listed in Appendix B, the Interview Instrument. These questions ask about the personal and professional background of each participant, including how they would describe their leadership. After getting this baseline information, they are asked about the status of their school culture in 2016, versus how they'd describe the culture at the end of this period of inspection in spring 2019. After the visible cultural changes are discussed, the changes in staff mindsets are considered. Diving deeper and going beyond the existing research, participants then describe the leadership strategies they report that they used utilized during this period, along with staff training that complemented these efforts. In each school setting interview, the entire interview was recorded using Zoom,

which transcribed each interview, which was then moved to a computer that is not connected to the internet to avoid potential exposure of identities.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Upon conclusion of this coding for all interviews, when it was determined which aspects of the responses pertained to student discipline, interrelationships between the responses of different interviewees were noted. For this research, explicitly, the interviews served to gather the recalled history of school leaders, which were then deciphered through a coding process, to give meaning to the collective efforts of school leaders towards reducing the racial discipline gap. This is the primary form of data collection, following the data gathering used to determine eligible school leaders. The writing is an outgrowth of their words, summarizing and at times quoting what they stated. The method of coding that was used is described as focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011), looking through the responses of the interviewees to find evidence of actions they took that they perceive resulted in the reduction of Black student suspensions. There were two cycles of coding: one to get a general title for each portion of the response from each participant, and then a second round to look for similarities between each portion. Within these coded responses, themes were identified, as well as sub-themes of which actions took place and what these should be titled.

Considerations included the frequency of response versus the significance of the impact of actions (Emerson, et al., 2011). A thematic analysis was conducted on each interview. This thematic analysis served as the foundation for making sense of the data. Themes were recognized, as identified while analyzing the interview raw data about the concept of leadership practices that potentially reduce racial discipline gaps. Using these themes, as part of an initial analysis of the raw data, a researcher attempts to apply methods of description (Wolcott, 1994).

Thinking beyond the specific interactions of how a specific situation is handled, is not only the experience of the interviewee but their entire history and background which lends to their perspective of the situation. The level of detail in the notes and interviews is key to providing as much as possible to be analyzed. It's important to note that one interviewee may share a different account of history than others. There is not one version of any event, but rather multiple versions.

Following an analytical framework, though listed as a method of description, seems like its' own meta-framework for approaching the analysis of results. It teaches how to have structure, and how to be well prepared during and after the research with which to analyze. The approach to maintaining a healthy skepticism is key because it allows the researcher to inspect their work with a critical lens. Thinking through interviews when completed, it is important to see how everyone may have strongly held beliefs regarding student discipline, and a theme about people having evidence of either rigorous research or lived experience (equally valid) that shapes their perception of how discipline should be implemented is relevant. As such, following up by triangulating data by looking for associated evidence such as practices described in interviews, seen in action, or other documentation helps eliminate bias that emerges from beliefs over impact for times when they may not correlate (Emerson et al., 2011).

The identity of the administrators who choose to participate in the study will be kept private. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. In the research notes, participants were given anonymized names to state their responses in the thematic summaries, while their names and school locations as well as any other identifiers will remain in internal notes only. No identifying information is included in the research, except that it will be noted that all administrators were leading Illinois schools in 2016-2019. Only I will continue to have access to the data, as the

information collected in the interviews will be stored on a device that will be locked and housed in a desk drawer and not connected to the internet.

### **Trustworthiness**

Within interviews, something traditionally viewed as more subjective, a case for trustworthiness through authenticity is made in the granular details provided in this format. The exacting, written, and spoken word of those with the most intimate knowledge of ongoings in schools within the context of the research subject provide the most authentic result possible. The goal, then for a researcher, is to emulate, encapsulate, reflect upon, and share out one's reflections with the utmost accuracy (Soganci, 2013; Fontana & Frey, 2005). There are two layers of concern regarding trustworthiness in this research, internal and external factors. Regarding internal factors, how much does the reality of the situation described by an interviewee match reality? How is the reality of what occurred, resulting in a reduction of the number of Black student suspensions evaluated? The level of congruence between perception and reality is what is sought. Though there is no absolute truth, strategies that can and will be used in this research to pursue a high level of trustworthiness include ensuring multiple methods of data collection, crystallization of those data collection (which grew out of the prior concept of triangulation), and member checks. The last method listed involves a transition to external factors, as well. Explaining this process, gathering multiple forms of data, from interviews to artifacts used to show evidence of what was stated in interviews, to corroborating testimony which has been made available (ex. Previously recorded Zoom meetings), helps add authenticity to what was stated in the one-time interviews. This helps crystallize what is found, as the words of the interviewee are combined with the words and multiple mediums of other artifacts. Then, as researcher, the member checks provide substance. This involves sharing initial findings with

the interviewee to see if it echoes their reports. If so, this not only capitalizes on the strong internal nature but gives a layer of external validation as well. The other critical layer of external support involves the researcher's position (Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2002).

To the greatest extent possible, withholding my perspective, desires, and wishes, and focusing on documenting the themes that were named from the interviews on the reports and evidence provided help result in a stronger, more valid, and trustworthy final product. To triangulate the evidence provided in a first-person account via interviews with school leaders, we already have the data which has been provided by the school prior, reported by the district and housed in state data warehouses. I then looked at evidence provided by school leaders in various formats, including asking questions within the interview that help uncover where hard evidence of their work is housed, such as artifacts of the work accomplished that they are discussing. This method of data collection to validate what is found has been recommended repeatedly when using interviews in research (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

The overall goal of trustworthiness in this study is to accurately capture the reflection of the participants. Analyzing their reflection is the goal, and their perception is their reality. So, as the researcher, I serve as their thought partner, to adopt all of the research stated above on trustworthiness in a mission towards bringing their voice to fruition. So, member checking and interpretation are key aspects of making sure that I am as accurate as possible in how I collect, summarize, and report their commentary.

### **Implications and Contributions**

Social justice in the context of this research ultimately results in relevant data. Students of any racial background or socioeconomic class should not be experiencing disproportionate discipline nor exclusion or academic learning gaps from their learning based on these

classifications. To achieve this social justice mission, many necessary conditions must be in place, as discussed later in this paper, along with additional challenges that need to be overcome. For example, laws guide policies in schools, which are usually grounded in some history. Case law influences both changes in law and school board policies. Board policies dictate, at least in part, how schools enact and enforce codes of conduct. Every step along this path of idea conception and historical precedence to implementation of practices in schools needs to be inspected, as they all have a role in the end goal of true social justice (Winn, 2018). Directly impacting how this mission towards justice and equity are realized in schools are all of the dynamics of human beings along the way. Variations in the behaviors of adults show in the state to state trends in policies (Mann, 2019), as well as the laws enacted by lawmakers and how they view discipline expectations from their role (Richey, 2016). Similarly, policy enforcement at the school level results in discord between staff and administrators more than any other type of policy or program (Prothero, 2019), serving as evidence that true justice not only does not exist in the outcomes but also importantly in the way in which adults strive to achieve outcomes. The outcomes, as well as the paths to achieving them, are very disparate.

The research of social justice, in the context of building equitable schools that serve all students in respectful and responsive ways, is grounded in issues of race and cultural divisions. The issues of equity involve socially constructed divisions, such as race, gender, and culture, as well as more definable categorizations such as students identified as having a disability or based on sex, socioeconomic status, and religion. It is further complicated by the fact that each of us has multiple facets to our identity, including race, gender, sex, culture, religion, and lived experience which all shape ourselves and our view of the world. Regardless of the origin or importance of these qualities, which will always be debated, they underlie any issues being

addressed in schools. Privilege exists for those who fit into the dominant category of each of these labels, such as a White male of European heritage, of moderate to high income, Christian, cis-gender heterosexual, who speaks English natively, without a disability (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). The intersections of these qualities are complicated and complex. A thorough understanding of not only the role of each form of oppression by itself but how one impacts the other is necessary to dig deep into the insidious ways in which discrimination exists.

There is evidence that teacher training on implicit bias and interrogating and developing an understanding of one's Whiteness reduces the likelihood of adverse impact on Black students regarding student discipline and classroom management practices (Utt & Tochluk, 2020; Sleeter, 2001). However, these studies are limited in their scope and structure (Arsenault, 2018, Boucher, 2016). More research is needed to determine what efforts have the most significant impact on reducing disproportionate disciplinary practices on a larger scale in ways that are mainly transferrable from one school community to another. While some researchers have provided the characteristics and core beliefs embodied by educators, school leaders, and districts to close opportunity gaps, more research is needed to determine what steps helped and continue to help pursue these outcomes (Scheurich & Laible, 1995). There are very few studies that show what has effectively been done by school leaders to impact the disparity between White and Asian students versus Black students in student discipline outcomes in majority minoritized school communities that focus on the leadership strategies implemented (Lustick, 2017; Hansen, 2016). Focusing on implicit bias in schools, addressing what identified teacher mindsets through studies that looked at responses to questions about student behavior and potential consequences can be achieved. This involved strategies such as researchers disclosing the home lives of students to see if that affected the thoughts and feelings of the teachers when determining a fair disciplinary



consequence, as well as the intentionality of discipline by race (Gullo et al., 2019).

Recommendations exist for administrators and disciplinarians that would impact these disparities, but the focus of their research is on identifying why these disparities exist in the perceptions of those in charge of discipline and which leadership frame they are utilizing when implementing consequences (Davis, 2008). Additionally, approaches taken by teachers that effectively close racial discipline gaps without mentioning the role of the school leader are important to consider (Morgan, 2011). Similarly, what factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality from the principal's perspective without providing evidence of the impact of the principal's actions are important to consider (Workman, 2020). There is almost no research existing that shows the actions taken by school leaders that have led to a reduction in the disproportionate discipline outcomes along racial lines.

It is acknowledged that further research on what impacts teacher bias is worthwhile. Race is complex, and much of how biases play out in classrooms across different racial lines in racially diverse classrooms warrants more investigation. How are students of different racial backgrounds in the same classroom affected differently, and how is this impacted by the presence of one another? Additionally, while there is significant research on the relationship development between staff and students (Morgan, 2011; Cook et al., 2018; Butler, 2017; Anyon et al., 2018), it's unclear as to the direct impact of relationship enhancement and improvement has on reducing bias (Warikoo et al., 2016).

The racial disparities present in student discipline outcomes across our country result from the biases that teachers have, grounded in an unjust educational system. To create an equitable learning environment for all students that focuses on supporting students and abolishes punishment structures that disproportionately punish Black students, mindsets need to change,

followed by policies and practices. In the coming chapters, I will discuss the current research on what research says about shifting mindsets in the context of White teachers in schools as they address the behavior of students of different racial backgrounds. The process by which data was collected adds to the existing literature through a qualitative approach that provides context and positive outcomes.

### **Summary**

There is significant research in the field on both the concept of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and how it's created and manifested in schools, as well as how and why there are a disproportionate amount of Black students suspended in schools in America. Unfortunately, there is a need for further research on how school leaders are successfully addressing this issue. This research adds to the body of evidence regarding what has worked for some in certain contexts (Sanchez & Watson, 2021). Interviews, capturing the honest and direct perspective of those who have led these efforts while striving for the highest level of ethics and validity, provide a useful example as considerations for school leaders, researchers, and community members tasked with the same challenges of supporting student success through improving school cultures and reducing racial discipline gaps.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on leadership strategies that significantly reduced Black student suspension rates in Chicago Public schools from fall 2016 to spring 2019. For this study, I gathered data from eight principals using a semi-structured interview protocol. I analyzed the interview data thematically in response to the following two research questions:

1. What school leadership practices enacted by Chicago Public Schools elementary school principals are present in the reduction of Black student suspensions?
2. In what ways were the teachers engaged to show evidence of the reduction of Black student suspensions?

The goal of this study was to determine which leadership practices related to the theoretical framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016) were present when there was a reduction in Black student suspensions in identified Chicago Public Schools, among research sites where school leaders were willing to participate and share their perspective on their experience from the period between the 2016-17 school year and the 2018-2019 school year. The researcher is aware that this topic is multi-faceted, and not explainable simply through participant responses. In this chapter, I describe the study participants and the themes that were selected from the interview data.

### **Participant Background and Information**

The participants in this study agreed to participate after being contacted and informed of the nature of the study outside of everyone's work obligations. The participants were chosen from publicly available data from the Illinois State Board of Education (Expulsions, Suspensions, and Truants by District, 2023), which signified that they qualified for the study due to their school's having data that showed a significant (quantified as greater than 20%) reduction

in suspensions from 2016 to 2019, and their status as the principal of that school at the time. After attempting multiple methods of contacting all 25 principals who qualified based on these criteria, the eight that responded and agreed to participate in the interview were the basis of this research, as agreed upon in the proposed study in chapter 1. Those eligible that were not interested in participating or did not participate for other reasons were those who either did not respond to my outreach, or those who did not respond in time to be one of the eight that were interviewed. While multiple attempts were made to reach out to all eligible participants from the role of researcher, there were a total of twelve who initially responded, and of those twelve, the eight who were interviewed were the totality of those interested and willing to participate.

The participants all vary in tenure in the role, gender, race, and region of the city. Though there are various types of grade-level structured schools within Chicago Public Schools, including PreK through 8th grade, Kindergarten through 8th grade, 6th through 8th grade, and a few other breakdowns, most elementary schools are structured as PreK through 8th grade. This includes all eight participants in this study. As agreed upon in the informed consent, and listed in detail in the appendix of this dissertation, their identities will remain confidential. No trend amongst all leaders is present in their identities and backgrounds that would otherwise give rise to the impact of their work, beyond all being school principals who had been principals of their school for the tenure of time from 2016 to 2019. Additionally, the self-described and evidenced leadership style and approach of each principal varied widely. There is not a singular nor generally identifiable recommendable approach to leadership that came through in this research that would be able to suggest that it would have an outsized impact on student discipline outcomes itself. Instead, school leaders in this study were able to use their own identity, personality, knowledge of their skills and deficits, and contextual factors to impact results

beyond one prescribed leadership method. A description of each leader is below, with pseudonyms used to protect identities. A description of all these participants, in order, is listed below.

Table 1: Description of Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Years as principal in the fall of 2016	Race	Sex	% of Black students enrolled	Approximate enrollment in fall 2016	Approximate Black Students in fall 2016	School region	Self-described leadership style
Harry	6	White	Male	6%	550	33	Southwest	Advocacy leadership
Helen	8	Black	Female	84%	300	252	West	I serve my community <i>and</i> Distributed leadership
Larry	12	Latinx	Male	2%	1,350	27	Far northwest	Distributed leadership
Patrice	12	Black	Female	97%	500	485	South	Empowerer
Paula	10	Black	Female	95%	575	546	Near south	Visionary servant leader
Ned	14	Latinx	Male	11%	690	76	Northwest	Direct but honest, willing to coach and support
Bertha	6	Black	Female	98%	425	417	Far south	Working on ourselves first
Shelly	13	White	Female	20%	540	108	Northwest	High expectations with support

Harry is a White male leading a neighborhood district school in a southwest side neighborhood, a predominantly low-income Latinx neighborhood with a large percentage of immigrant families whose first language is Spanish. While they have a bilingual program, they are not designated as having a dual language or bilingual education structure. Students do receive support for their transitional language needs as they learn English. Though there were only roughly 33 Black students at the school during the time of this shift in school culture took place, it's clear that discipline structures were disproportionately targeting them. This principal acknowledged the challenges he inherited and focused in the interview on the barriers he faced at his school including teacher resistance, union grievances, and community perception. He described his work as a data consultant before becoming a principal, which framed the conversation and influenced much of it, as he brought up examples of research he had done while in his role as principal. He mentioned that, when he entered the school, things had started to fall apart before he arrived when the prior principal announced months prior that she would be leaving. Thus, when he entered, there was much to be done to re-establish systems and structures. He stated, "Concerns with behavior and a behavior management system concerns, with a lack of alignment and coherence, and curriculum were the big ones, but then the things that were listed as strengths were teacher collaboration, teacher to teacher trust. Additionally, enrollment was in free fall." This principal leveraged the Five Essentials My Voice, My Schools Survey for years to help determine what progress was needed and being made regarding the school community's evolution (Hart et al., 2020). He also focused on the data of what was commonly known as the school's report cards, titled the School Quality Rating Profile, highlighting metrics that he tracked and focused on for improvement so that efforts he helped lead would show in results and thus simultaneously positively impact the school and show

publicly so that future families would take note. This principal acknowledged how the district had helped him recruit teachers within his time as principal, due to district initiatives that helped him get early access to teaching candidates, known as the Opportunity Schools program. This principal is the only one to explicitly mention his use of data throughout his interview. While it cannot be determined to what extent each school leader used data to inform their decisions and actions, because it was not explicitly asked, it's clear that data allowed this leader (and allows all others) to see tangible and trackable results, similar to the result itself of the number of suspensions being reduced.

Helen is a Black woman who has been leading her west side school for four years before the research study period. As a neighborhood school, they take students from the zoned area, while allowing for enrollment from those outside the boundaries if seats are designated for this purpose by the school. The neighborhood her school is in is nearly all Black and high poverty. Their community had experienced the loss of a child in recent years and was still coping with the trauma. This principal referenced multiple times how being connected as a whole community helped give them purpose in their work. The principal had graduated from schools in the area and still lived in that community. She stated:

I'd say at least 50% of us live in this community. And so the relationships that we have with our parents are different. We get phone calls and texts and emails from parents over the weekend about things, instead of coming in on Monday and finding out all of these things. So we were able to jump in and troubleshoot and get in and, you know, get our hands already not just with that incident, but with a lot of things that happen and so just being more hands-on.

This community value gave rise to a focus on family relationships. When asked about how to address behavioral issues in the school, Helen encourages teachers to use building relationships with families as a primary strategy by asking:

Have you met with Mom? Would you like for me to meet with you? We started to have more collaborative meetings with parents so that it is not the teacher alone, and that can be difficult for teachers because sometimes we're not comfortable with certain situations but we started having conversations together.

Larry, a Latinx male, leads the largest school in this data set and had been there for eight years when this study period began. His school is situated on the far northwest side and, like Harry, is a highly Latinx school with similar demographics and predominantly low income. They also have the same transitional bilingual structure as Harry's school. It's interesting to note that this principal has the smallest Black student population by size and percentage, though he was able to acknowledge how their efforts supported that population. Though the literature in this study is focused on Black students, this principal was able to articulate how his school's focus on instructional improvement helped lead to a more positive school climate that benefitted all students. He shared, "It was our second year of guided reading implementation at that time, and I remember that being a big deal because we were like working with people from Fountas and Pinnell and small group instruction became very important." He also tied in much of the social-emotional work going on at their school, by stating, "We also started to work with CASEL to implement PATHS. It's an acronym; it's a social-emotional learning program, [emotional] problem solving for primary grades." He tied these two areas of focus together, commenting, "I mean maybe the combination of a few of those things mixed in with the with all the stuff we were doing for guided reading and NWEA helped."



Patrice works on Chicago's south side and has been in her role as long as Larry. She identifies as a Black woman and leads a neighborhood school in a community that is nearly all Black and low-income. She describes herself as an *empowerer*, and states:

I have to think about what that meant. So if I say that I'm empowering, I'm giving you the tools and I had to be willing to step back and let people do what they needed. I have this sign that says 'grow where you're planted,' and so I do believe in providing that growth.

She focused multiple times on what tools she was referencing, in the form of training and resources needing to be in place before consequences could be assigned. She commented:

Maybe not even mid-year I came across a lot of these CHAMPs books. So the Network Office was kind of dumping them off, and I took them, and we began to pick this book apart along with Fostering Resilient Learners and what this book does is it talks about the trauma of children, talks about the trauma of you know just kind of being in this community at large, and we begin to frame our thinking about what do we do differently. We also became a part of the restorative practice initiative, where I had a restorative practice coach, teachers were part of the process, where they learned about you know what we should do and how we should do it better. We began to aggressively implement it. That CHAMPs piece was very important, because through discovery people were realizing their systems and structures were not in place, and so I need to fix those structures. So I'm not penalizing a kid for getting up to get a pencil or go into the locker or whatever a kid may have been doing. That was causing those problems, so it was that piece that kind of caused us to move to a better place.

This helped highlight how she was able to leverage training to shift mindsets, while also reflecting on her growth areas have been at the school as principal for years before this shift took place.

Paula was situated very similarly to Patrice: a Black woman in a community of similar demographics with a school size and demographics similar: Black, nearly all low income, with a similar number of students. She had been leading for six years when this study data was collected. The most significant difference between these two participants' research sites is that Paula is the principal at a city-wide magnet school, and thus her students come from across the city. The city-wide magnet structure in Chicago's schools involves a true lottery system when enrolling in grades 1-8, where all students who apply by the deadline have an equalized shot at receiving an offer depending on the number of students made available by the school staff. In Kindergarten and PreK, the lottery is differentiated to also include tiered enrollment categories based on neighborhood income, plus a category for proximity to allow those who live within 1.5 miles of the school to have greater access. Still, the whole process is automated within these criteria. A complicating factor that affected this school's culture is that they received students from a closing school around the time of their higher number of suspensions, in 2016. So, they made a very conscious effort to focus on social-emotional learning to develop a new positive culture. She stated, "So our culture had to do a major shift. I think one of the biggest things that we had to do was lean into our SEL program that we were using at that time, which is the Leader in Me program and use that and add up PBIS component to it because we had a lot of children who did not know our school and our way of doing things and how we organize our environment for learning. So we do have focus on comfortability." That led to where they are now as a school, as she described, "We were really community-oriented, putting in place a lot of structures. The

school was very calm. That's the word. I love to describe it, and we were on our way to being the school that we are today.”

Ned was the most seasoned veteran in his role, being the principal of his neighborhood school for 10 years at the time the data identification period began. He identifies as a Latino, leading in a school that is in a part of Chicago that has remained consistently low income while other neighborhoods nearby have gentrified. His is the only school in the data set that has a dual language structure in which the instructional model is to develop biliteracy in all students enrolled in this program, learning both English and Spanish. Like Harry and Larry, his school has a small Black population representing only 11% of the overall enrollment, but his efforts to improve school culture made a significant impact on this population. While many of the principals in this study started their culture-shifting with research or new training, this principal started to shift his school’s culture after soliciting and receiving honest feedback from his students. He made this clear in his responses by stating:

[Students] said that we didn't listen to them. They felt that we were punitive, and we started to do some work around that, but mainly it's after looking at the data in terms of suspensions, the tensions in all this stuff, we notice a pattern...that we had to confront with our staff, and people were open to having this difficult conversation, and they knew that I was not going to back down in terms of engaging our entire staff.

He was incredibly self-critical, going further by sharing, “But you know, together we began to listen to our students, and we found out a lot right, even about ourselves, including myself. You know, how the students perceive me...and that was a wake-up call for me to stomach. Trust me.” He was able to share the very positive turn that the school made, including:

I was trying to build that bridge right without compromising our expectations. Of course, they need to know the expectations in terms of classroom behaviors and all those things. But we began to listen to including our teachers and implementing different programs in the classrooms. You know, and that changed the culture a lot, and they felt they began to feel heard. They began to feel, you know like they wanted to be in school.

Bertha's school most resembled that of Patrice, in that both are comprised of nearly all students who identify as Black and low income, while also being classified as magnet lottery schools, drawing students from around the city to attend, without preference. She employed a similar strategy to Patrice utilizing the Leader in Me curriculum, though intentionally directed efforts to focus on adult growth as part of the program. Versus Paula, Bertha was newer to her school at the beginning of this period in which change occurred and thus shared how she leveraged existing staff to help utilize trusted leadership and expertise while she took time to build relationships with adults, focusing on one staff member leader in particular. She stated:

Leader in Me provided one full year of intense training. It's all about the adults first. The seven habits are the same for the students. So everything was about living this in your everyday life as an adult. It is only in the second year that you start to introduce this concept and curriculum to students. So we spent a year working on ourselves as adults, using Leader in Me in the building. I think that that was a huge win for us in terms of changing my mindset as well as just my leadership style. It helped me in building the capacity of those around me and letting those talents shine through, you know.

Shelly also leads a magnet school, similar to others, and identifies as a White woman. She had been at her school for nine years at the beginning of the period in which the school culture shifted, and had been well-established and understood by her staff according to her recollections. She is very direct and firm in her approach while providing the necessary resources for success. She made it clear that, after cleaning up some messy systems such as hallway transitions and classroom management in her first few years, she was able to focus on tightening up culture in ways that showed in the results. At first, earlier in her tenure, she gave examples such as:

Kids are running in the halls, and we are not a neighborhood school, so kids had to rely on busing. So you had to get kids on buses at the end of the day, and kids would just not get on the bus, and then, you know, we'd be sitting here for a few hours after school waiting for someone to come and get these kids and so it just was crazy. That is something that we addressed immediately.

After those essential structures were in place, she shared that later:

It was really important to work through the adults. Kids need to be heard. That's my expectation. It was simple stuff, almost like sentence stems of saying things like, I know that I can see that you're upset, but can you know what? Let me finish this. And what do you need? ...to get a drink of water, or can you go to the restroom? Sit over there, or can you sit in your chair and then and then we're going to talk about this as soon as I'm done with this. Literally like that, you know you're taking 10 seconds to say a sentence to kids and our kids responded well to that.

She maintained her high expectations in situations like this example, and if teachers weren't willing or able to abide by the cultural expectations she had established, she stated that she helped them find a new opportunity at a new school or outside of the profession because it was not a good fit in their school's new direction.

### **Data Analysis Process**

I analyzed data through a school leader's lens and uncovered strategies that would help inform various stakeholder groups as readers, as described further in the Summary of Findings and various Recommendations sections in chapter 5. The five main categories chosen from the theoretical framework that were used to identify themes include (1) critical self-awareness, (2) critiquing inequitable practices, (3) culturally responsive teacher development, (4), promoting equitable practices, and (5) trusting adult to adult relationships (Khalifa et al., 2016). All transcripts were inspected multiple times.

Having been a school leader myself in the same district as the research participants, I am familiar with not only their role but the context of our district as a whole for over a decade; I was able to contextualize their responses when they used specific terminology and reference to aspects of the district's operational and instructional priorities at various points throughout the timeline presented in the discussion. I was able to authentically capture their comments without getting either lost in nuance or missing any key details as the entire conversation was transcribed automatically. This allowed me to listen to their interviews again, and make sure that every word was captured properly. When filtering the Excel spreadsheet of all transcripts, it was interesting to note how a category such as critiquing inequitable practices oftentimes related to promoting equitable practices within a scenario given. This seems to be because the admonishing and addressing of these unfair practices signaled a shift in practice and the reduction gave space for a

new set of strategies to be collected. Aligned with the philosophy of the leader, more just and egalitarian structures were established. This was nearly universal, and the opportunity for this was presented in questions that asked about the period from 2016 to 2019. It seemed as if participants felt encouraged to share the before and after effects of their efforts, and since these categories related to aspects of student behavioral and disciplinary management strategies, it was no surprise that this manifested in their responses.

The two categories of critiquing inequitable practices and promoting equitable practices also oftentimes merged with culturally responsive teacher development, as it seems as if it is the result of some type of intentional effort to develop the skills of staff that resulted in a shift in practices. Thus, many specific examples of training, skill development, the introduction of new philosophies that required implementation support, and even direct conversation that was done through a lens of coaching by the research participant them self or their designee was a key step in this process.

Another way in which leaders reflected on their efforts was through critical self-reflection, though it was noticeable in the data that the category of self-awareness was rarely present. I perceive this likely to it being a minimal part of the interview protocol. While the interview presented opportunities for leaders to reflect on their work and add explicit mention of their growth and critical reflection upon their learning about topics such as inclusive and restorative student discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline, this was not explicitly asked nor urged in the questionnaire. Thus, it was the least identified category by far, but also significant in that it was discussed without prompting by multiple participants. As a researcher, I own that my interview protocol did not necessitate this, and acknowledge this as a situation and that it can be perceived as an omission or oversight in the protocol. So, the category of critical self-awareness

was present almost always exclusively as the leader came to a self-realization about one of the themes that were emerging. For example, when a leader realized, upon reflecting on their ethics, morals, and values that they may be perceived a certain way by their staff which may present barriers to building trust and achieving equitable outcomes, they shifted how they presented themselves. Another example of self-realization of one's leadership includes when leaders were reflective on the types of training that were being offered in their school, and how it could include more about building the necessary skills for implementing restorative practices. A third involves when leaders were able to realize that it took direct action to confront inequities. Each of these examples was present in more than one of the respondents. They manifest throughout the themes below, as undergirding the overarching larger leadership action. Though instances of critical self-reflection rarely surfaced in the interviews, they were present, and are included in the results below.

As described in the process above, this accuracy and context gave rise to codes that seemed to align around specific themes. The specific title for each theme evolved over the writing of this research, as it was intended to be authentic to the amalgamation of voices of leaders, authentic to what they shared as relevant to the research questions. While the wording could be rewritten in multiple ways, the essence of what they present should be captured as major findings, as interpreted by this researcher.

### **Themes Identified**

This section outlines the results of the specific themes which appeared throughout the interviews. These themes were organized based on the responses given by participants and the theoretical framework of this study, Culturally Responsive School Leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). As a researcher, I analyzed data through a school leader's lens according to the



methodology described in the last chapter. From the interviews, four themes were identified: (1) Ethic of Workplace Trust; (2) Shifting Mindsets: Out with Old Exclusionary and Punitive Habits, In with New Inclusive and Restorative Adult Habits; (3) Misconceptions and Re-Education Towards Restorative Practices; and (4) Shifting Momentum to a Sense of Belonging, Across School. This section outlines the results of the identified themes which were found amongst the responses of participants and were supported by the data collection process following repeated analysis of each line of response.

### **Ethic of Workplace Trust**

Trust here relates to the administrator and staff relationship dynamics. This is present when any staff feels respected as professionals by their principals, see their principals as competent school managers perceive a sense of integrity within their administrator, and when teachers genuinely feel that their principals have a genuine interest in their well-being (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). The form in which this took varied. This included efforts such as one on one interviews hosted by the administrator upon their school entry, to get to know the staff and ask about what they saw as areas of growth for the school. They gave examples of listening to teachers' needs throughout their tenure and giving help. Over time, this can lead to increased trust.

Due to the interviewees all being of different stages of tenure within their respective buildings, their relevant efforts and forms in which trust took may have varied. For some, the period in question was early in their first few years as a principal in their first four-year performance contract, and thus their building of relationships with staff in 2016-17 was more emerging. Others had spent over twenty years in their building, possibly working first as a teacher and then as assistant principal, so the relationship dynamics would have changed as this

leader moved into a different role over time. Still, the fact that each was able to acutely discuss how they took concerted efforts to build relationships, coalition leveraging relationships, and navigate through at times challenging situations such as staff resistance with an end goal of having strong team morale should be noted.

When discussing leveraging relationships, school leaders used the power and dynamics of key staff in their buildings. Bertha provided a powerful example. Serving as a model of how this can be done, when she started (around the time of the research study years referenced in this research), she actively leveraged the most influential staff member in the building: the point person who supervised discipline, in a role commonly titled as dean. As this dean had a strong presence across the school in the role of supervising and implementing student discipline, and was beloved and respected by all stakeholder groups, it was key to acknowledge and give space for this person to effectively lead in their role. For years, this dean had been effectively working to implement restorative and inclusive practices such as supportive academic and emotional support programs outside of school time to help go beyond traditional school offerings, without these becoming punitive. During the school day, she supported the school's disciplinary program with a mindset that would have been even more effective had it been allowed to thrive further. Then, once Bertha took charge as the principal, the conditions for this dean's leadership to thrive came to full fruition, as evidenced in the data. A shift took place when both leaders, principal, and disciplinarian, were able to synchronize efforts, and authorize the work to be led and complemented by one another, through both the formal role of principal and the more informal, collegial, and trusted thought partner role of the disciplinarian. In this way, leaders leverage leaders, supporting their work, their growth, and their implementation. While this was present in multiple research sites, it was most clearly evident in the data in one school in particular and

appears to be well known and acknowledged within that school community as it has been celebrated and discussed in other mediums as well.

A specific recollection from Bertha about her teacher leader who made a powerful impact includes:

As talented as that she was, they had put her in the classroom as a because she's just as talented in the classroom, and you know she was moving scores and things like that...She was kinda in and out and doing double-duty things like that. And so when I arrived I made sure I noticed her talents and skills and make sure she stayed in that role as the dean. And so from my experience again, we started approaching climate teams. She led that team. So part of this was about just having the right people in the right seat on the right bus, and that's what we began.

She also shared:

I had a talented person and trusted, right? Even just the level of trust she had with the staff because she had been in their building for so long. She helped deliver that message in a way it needed to be heard, so getting those types of people in my corner was paramount to the success of everything, making sure that it was messaged in a way that it didn't follow those years, so she did a lot of behind the scenes work with changing attitudes.

The concept of trust was discussed by multiple participants, even within the concept of adult challenges. This can be seen as an evolution, including barriers in need of addressing. On the pathway to creating a culture that fosters the factors listed above, change may be needed. Additionally, as momentum is built towards a culture that promotes the integrity of restorative and inclusive student practices, strict adherence to the status quo may be observed. This was

prevalent in the data, as voiced by leaders including situations in which old habits remained present and required additional challenge and confrontation by school leaders. This is expanded upon further in the next theme as well. Leaders addressed this by focusing on building relationships with their staff and making sure they could support their staff in doing the same with one another. Harry stated:

I would say...I don't know if tough love is the right word, but it's just like I've got to be able to say to my faculty and staff, not only is this state policy, but also district policy. So we are going to do this. We're sticking to it, and like I'm here to support you. Others are here to support you. We build in those systems, instructors for mentors, coaches, and now restorative justice coordinators, like we're gonna uphold that expectation, we're not putting kids out, we don't humiliate kids, we don't yell at kids.

Larry stated, "I don't know...we were collaborating. I was constantly listening to them, trying to figure out what I can do to help." Patrice stated, "So really strong relationships. And I think one of the first chapters in the CHAMPS book talks about relationships." Patrice also stated:

...it was building that kind of relationships in the school that help to make a difference, so you were able to hear your colleagues say 'girl, your kids are noisy in the hallway right now' and you're not offended by it no you know. They walk in at 7:45. So this is my meeting greed so from 7:15 to 7:45 I'm at the front desk so when they come in I have treats for them by the swipe machine, or they get the coffee and hot chocolate and the tea and I'm like, hey, I'm so glad to see you today.

It was clear that nearly all participants had placed concerted effort into making sure that improved staff culture was a priority and something they openly acknowledged was needed before and meanwhile making other efforts for improvement. The My Voice, My Schools annual survey published by The University of Chicago in which school culture status is surveyed by students, staff, and families was referenced by multiple participants as an opportunity for goal setting towards improved school culture (Hart et al., 2020).

Evans (1996), Lewin (1947), and Schein (1996) all highlight the importance of concepts such as relationships, trust, and creating an environment where psychological trust and risk are safe. They also discuss how change is a form of grief, as it serves as a loss of autonomy, competency, and stability. These adaptive challenges are major barriers for leaders to overcome. It's clear in the interviews that each school leader had made concerted efforts to attempt to foster a positive staff culture, in which they took time, energy, and explicit action to foster a workplace where they could challenge the inherent mindsets, beliefs, and practices of staff. While this was met with resistance at times as noted in the corresponding themes below, their reflections on their ability to make the effort to do so are noted and evident in the data. Consider how every school leader, in response to explicit questions, reflected upon how they used words and shared concepts such as *support*, *relationships* (amongst staff, notably, in this context), *feedback*, *collaborating*, *greeting*, *hearing one another*, from leader to staff and vice versa, sense of family, *take care* of one another, celebrations, rituals, and parties, and *getting to know one another*. These efforts take time and energy, and though this research study did not provide the opportunity to gather evidence of these specific actions, the embeddedness of the responses within various themes herein is evidence itself that it was an important notion of the school leader in their efforts to achieve the results that are part of the identifying dataset reducing the

number of Black student suspensions. Still, the comments shared by principal participants were revealing. Harry stated:

I did one on one conversations with every single staff member when I onboarded, and I just want to know a little bit about them. I'm looking at my notes here. I asked what the strengths of the school were what they wanted to see as changes and just any questions they had for me or anything they needed.

Larry shared:

So I probably was my second to my second contract. I had a lot of trusts. My trust was pretty high. It was just more that teacher-to-teacher trust was always a concern. We were going pretty strong and we were able to have a good feel [because] we were just working together. I don't know...we were collaborating. I was constantly listening to them, trying to figure out what I can do to help.

Paula shared, “And so we've kind of come up together, and there's a really strong sense of family in the building.”

### **Shifting Mindsets: Out with Old Exclusionary and Punitive Habits, In with New Inclusive and Restorative Adult Habits**

Like an indirect correlation between two data sets, it can be imagined how in a significant number of the schools present, there was a gradual decline in discriminatory and punitive practices while an increase in restorative and inclusive practices took hold. While neither trend would be a straight line, their overall progress over time is clear in the data. An example of this would be in the question structure, how administrators gave numerous examples of unacceptable, harmful adult behaviors exhibited in questions that referenced the beginning of the period referred to as the baseline in 2017, versus the number of these same types of behaviors present in

the latter stages of the time, in the spring of 2019. This was one of the most profoundly present themes in the data, as it took many forms. Whether it came in the form of training, direct interactions with individuals, or building the capacity of leaders through empowering team members to lead others, it was ever present in all participants.

Of the most basic expectations of a school leader, enforcing district policies as well as supervising and managing employees are some of the most critical. Situations in which employees are implementing policies that are either in direct contradiction to guidance and directives given by their administration or otherwise seem harmful warranted not only being addressed by their supervisor, but an intersection by which the employee would then decide whether they should shift practices or choose to move on to a new workplace environment may have taken place. Harry stated:

I had struggles within the first couple of years with corporal punishment, both physical and verbal, with people that have very negative interactions and experiences with kids. I did not shy away from writing them up and holding them accountable and every single situation. I lost two teachers that I would say some of my veteran staff would be like, wow, what a big loss for our school. They may have some higher than average test scores, but they treated their kids like they were just obedient zombies.

Larry recounted:

We did have a lot of grade level meetings where they just had to realize that no, that [behavior] didn't warrant a suspension, and no, even though the kid might need a time out or a break from the class, or a break from you because the teacher is escalated, they're coming back.

Some were very explicit about moving staff along to new opportunities outside of their school, such as Ned, commenting, "...the one-on-one conversations that I had with different personnel, that you know that this is not for you. So I have had to counsel out quite a few teachers where I felt that they were abusing policies." Harry echoed, "I need to see growth, and I need to see change, and people who aren't capable of that can't stay at [school name]."

Evidence of administrators addressing workplace inequitable practices was varied. A generalized example from the data includes teachers confronting students directly when the student has acted inappropriately, or worse, grabbing students physically. Data were shared regarding adults condemning student behaviors of an individual in the presence of their peer, or excluding students from class for long periods to be referred for a disciplinary infraction for minor offenses. There were examples of students using profanity towards students or throwing physical objects at students. In all of these instances, it could be expected that not only was a culture of restorative practices not being fostered, but it would also be reasonably assumed that the student would have experienced the harm of some form as a result of the behaviors of the adult.

Without giving specifics such as names, consequences, or details, administrators shared from their perspective how they worked to hold staff accountable for unacceptable practices they exhibited. This sometimes resulted in the staff member choosing, at some point either immediately or shortly, to leave the school and possibly the profession, because there was vast disagreement with the policies or they may have felt that they were not welcomed due to their beliefs. Regardless, the leadership activities of the school administrator show that they followed through on expectations to enact policies that were restorative and inclusive toward student behavioral needs.



Expanding restorative habits was present through two major, prevalent codes, labeled as *coaching restorative habits* and *developing restorative skills*. The terms habits and skills are used albeit somewhat interchangeably because they both refer to an increase in skills that positively impact school culture in a way that will make students feel included and welcomed (Cano, 2022). Through the efforts of school leaders, the culture of schools transformed to show an increase in the prevalence of traits that respect the cultures, voices, perspectives, and identities of students by centering their experiences. Leaders reflected on efforts to establish, expand, and implement mentoring programs with new and existing staff, as well as a general concept of growing and developing staff once hired. One principal shared a philosophy of why coaching is beneficial for all staff, regardless of their amount of tenure, by making analogies to other professions that utilize coaching throughout their field for professionals of all career stages.

Ned and Shelly shared evidence of how their school cultures shifted during their tenure. These two leaders in particular had been leading their respective schools for longer than any other participant. During this critical time, in which a change was noted in data, it's clear that something changed within the school as a drastic reduction in suspensions is likely beyond coincidental. Both leaders shared how they changed their approach to implementing practices that would overtly change how students were treated. Ned shared how this was based on feedback received from students in which it was perceived by students and families that there was a discriminatory and silencing culture present. He stated, "Just stop and listen for a minute like there's got to be some honesty in their words, you know. Give them some credibility. They're smarter than we give them credit for." This school leader fought to undo that concept through actionable means explained elsewhere in this study. Shelly made a conscious effort to implement guidance from CPS that had been emboldened by the laws passed by Illinois in 2015 that

required a more concerted effort to keep students in school versus suspending them for nearly all behaviors (“SB 100 (and Other Laws),” 2015). In both situations, a tangible change was noted.

Examples were also shared by multiple participants about how they instilled a culture of focusing on the growth and development of children, through coaching. While this may have taken the form of whole-staff training and messaging at times, leaders gave concrete examples of how they address staff individually about the goals they have for their students to meet targeted growth metrics by maintaining high expectations and being responsive to their needs. Race was also referenced by leaders in this process while calling out the underperformance of Black students and avoiding excuses for their lack of meeting expectations academically and behaviorally while maintaining high standards. Ned stated, “I have a math coach and a literacy coach, and they helped us, you know, shape the conversations also in small groups, and things like that.” About this, Bertha shared, “You know, I can coach you instruction, you know that I can do it...but it's hard to change adult attitudes.”

Under the umbrella category of staff professional development and training, the form by which the developing restorative skills and shifting of practices and mindsets can occur is varied. Myriad examples exist in the data, as would be echoed in the experience of any educator or leader. Respondents gave examples of teacher leaders training peers, bringing in outside facilitators to lead staff development, sending groups of staff to training and conferences, aligning practices across the school after either some or all received specialized training, and the immersive reading of books as a staff as well.

Examples of these training evident in the data include Responsive Classroom, Teach Like a Champion, CHAMPs, Calm Classroom, Second Step, Conscious Discipline, Leader in Me, Mindful Practices, PATHS, as social-emotional learning or mindfulness training vendors, and

many more (Benson et al., 1994; Caracelo, 2016; Greenberg et al., 1995; Herman et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2017; Mindful Practices, 2023; Moreno, 2017; Reed et al., 2020; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2012; Wenz-Gross et al., 2018). No school leader shared that the training itself was what made the impact in isolation, rather every leader gave detailed accounts of how the introduction, rollout, implementation, support, and follow-through with the accountability of their programs had been perceived to be the difference maker in having a positive impact on the school culture. This should not discount the evidence-based strategies that each service provider has cited in their rationale for the research underlying their approaches to their programs, but add specificity in how they have been utilized with fidelity. Further opportunities to look into what's working, including the use of these programs as part of a pathway towards reducing the number of exclusionary practices in schools, are laid out in chapter 5.

This shifting of mindsets also involves a heavy focus on developing empathy and the skills related to how we respond with empathy. Both were prevalent in the responses of participants. This involved explicit training such as those that developed skills in trauma responsiveness, as well as activities in which the principal themselves led sometimes creative activities about why and how we need to respond differently to our students, with more empathy. The actions taken by leaders seemed tailored to the needs of their specific staff and what their staff was ready to receive. Situations of support provided by school leaders in the data were varied. This included the leader's direct facilitation of training, in which they modeled and showcased the punitive and harmful behaviors we strive to avoid, directed at the teachers, to give them a feeling of what students experienced. Patrice shared:

I play some music [in a staff training], oh they love the music. We were dancing, and then I started giving people putting books and bags in their arms, putting

books, and then [they ask] Ms. Brown, what are you doing? I say, come on, keep going with me. Come on, keep up with me, and I'm just dancing, and then it became hard, and then I stopped the music, and I said, it is so hard to dance when you're loaded down with issues. Same thing for our kids. It's hard for them to dance, so when you're coming in this building, let us all be able to have this experience together, where we are building relationships and putting down the luggage. So we can dance, and it's those things I'm always making analogies, and always trying to touch here in the heart.

Two principals included the details of hiring and using a restorative justice coordinator who both facilitated student groups and modeled this action for various staff, to exemplify restorative practices and help spread these adult-led structures across the school. Harry stated, “He pushes into morning meetings every morning, either to give feedback and coaching to that teacher or to co-lead it or lead it. We're trying to maximize our investment.” Ned shared:

So we have a relationship, and she has always believed in the work that we're doing. So she is now supporting us to develop our teachers in terms of more restorative practices, and we do a lot of things for our students like [celebrations].

School leaders also called out and unpacked the type of community they were situated in, discussing and helping staff all develop their understanding of the identity of students, including the racial, socioeconomic, and aspects of safety that they bring to school with them. This involved, in many examples of school leaders in the data, the experiences of trauma that students face. The training examples provided by many school leaders included examples of vacillating between the providing of examples of trauma and how to deal with trauma.

As this theme states, the shifting of mindsets towards restorative and inclusive practices has a likelihood of hitting adults in a very profound way: when school staff, whose job primarily entails catering to the educational and well-being needs of children have a sense of empathy for the reality of challenges faced by their students, this can be a powerful force for realizing that practices that push students away from the potential of schooling. This can cause harm and that there should be a focus instead on practices that draw students closer towards engagement and inclusion. This critical pressure has incredible potential to change hearts and minds. While it could be assumed by many that the love of students and their passion for student success is inherent in the beliefs and conduct of all those who work with children in schools, sadly, the reality of the existence of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and the prevalence of practices that result in students being excluded from schools, accompanied by the data itself reflected upon by school leaders providing concrete examples by which there was a need to address these punitive practices necessitates the situation in which practices need transitioning towards a convention of empathy.

Another form of training that was found in the research, albeit in different forms, was that of modeling expected behaviors. In some instances, it was the leader who modeled behaviors expected by their staff. By exemplifying their expectations in themselves and then holding others accountable to meet that standard, they created a culture of skill development with and for their staff. Shelly shared:

So, because I think the staff it's really easy for me to say things but then not model that for the staff. They need to see that, and that I'm not just telling you to do something. You know where you're required to do this, but I would just pop in, and I would always lead by doing what I expect.

In another instance, it was by the school leader's recommendation and request that their staff observed school cultures where the expected adult and student behaviors were more present that helped set a tone for what should be the standard of conduct in their school. By seeing examples of success and real-life personification of what research describes as effective, leaders in these scenarios found ways to provide examples of what works. Shelly shared,

“Any other pieces of training, professional developments, teacher leader institute, you know, the beginning of the year back to school [professional development]. That...kind of really helped like nudge people. Honestly, I sought out other schools that I wanted to be like, you know, where I saw the things happening at that school that I wanted to see happen at [our school] and I connected with that principal and my teachers were in that building all the time.”

It's also important to note that every school included in this study draws students from communities that have experienced myriad trauma. This can be defined by the terminology described as Adverse Childhood Experiences, in which students have experienced triggers that have a lasting impact on their emotional and physical well-being. These experiences may involve physical or association with drug abuse, and other risky behaviors exhibited by those in the lives of the children. It may also involve being surrounded by crime, poverty, and challenges of immigration that may impede a child or their family's ability to make social progress. This has been not only associated with trauma in youth but an increased likelihood of adult risk behaviors and poor physical health status. While this is not an explicit aspect of the theoretical framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, when we consider the lived experiences of students and incorporating their lived experiences into the classroom, this is an essential step. So, when developing empathy for students, it is sadly convenient and tangible for school leaders in urban

schools such as these to draw real-world examples from their communities by which to prove the disparity in educational experiences for their students in which to highlight and build empathy for the reality of their students (Iachini et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2016, Duke et al., 2010).

While race was rarely mentioned in participant responses, it was embedded in several questions in the Interview Instrument. Thus, it was more than implied that we were discussing efforts to support Black students, as the questions called out this racial group in particular. Still, the omission of race in responses should be noted as a potential avenue for colorblindness. This is stated because race, diversity, and all forms of identity are not at the heart of this research directly. Student culture, as part of the theoretical framework utilized here, is extremely more complex than one factor. Thus, when considering what makes up a community, if it is racing homogenous or diverse, regardless, it is one where cultures emerge, develop, and can flourish. These cultures and senses of the community also give opportunities to deepen connections within, across, and far beyond one's borders that manifest in any means. So, we can embrace learning the diverse traits of one another in all forms.

It can't be ignored that evidence was simultaneously present regarding the building up of positive, inclusive, restorative mindsets and habits in contradiction to the work that breaks down exclusionary, harmful, and punitive mindsets. Across all respondents, one or both scenarios took place, and oftentimes they were intertwined. Out with the old and bad, and in with the good and positive. This was never immediate nor simple and required a gradual shift even if it felt immediate. Shifting a culture, most especially in the realm of mindsets, has shown in this evidence that it has implications and challenges. This is expanded upon in the next two sections, as it relates to the education of adults and the shifting of momentum.

## **Misconceptions and Re-Education Towards Restorative Practices**

The training, education, and perceptions of staff in these school sites before the research window dates in question were not inspected further, thus it's not clear what knowledge existed about effective student discipline. It's clear in the data that much occurred during this timeframe to educate staff about what works to reduce student suspensions and the occurrence of behavioral infractions, especially for Black students. The situation in these schools seems to be that staff either were not aware of what research has shown improves student discipline outcomes, or they chose not to believe that these practices had a positive impact on improving behavior. Regardless, the practices in question were not in place in the majority of schools where the interviews in this research study were conducted. As a result, school leaders made the conscious decision to educate their staff regarding effective discipline management practices.

Sometimes this staff education, as mentioned above, took the form of a universal program for aligning how the school approaches to discipline, such as CHAMPS (mentioned by Patrice), Teach Like a Champion (mentioned by Harry and Larry), Responsive Classroom (mentioned by Paula), Leader in Me (mentioned by Paula and Bertha), or other more organic to the school approach of aligned language and terminology. It's possible and likely that other programs are used, though these are the ones explicitly mentioned by the principal participants. This can include specific strategies that are either advocated for or required by the school leadership regarding how to respond to certain situations. For example, as described by Bertha, the Leader in Me program's implementation involves starting with adult training. For the first year, adults focus on their knowledge, conceptualization, and use of the central principles of the approach. This gives rise to internalizing these concepts and developing the skills within oneself, to be used later with students.



Going further, imagine training implemented with staff involving scenarios in which students behave certain ways that violate the Student Code of Conduct. In this training, whereas the situation would have been handled a specific way in the past that may have resulted in infractions, punishments, and exclusionary practices led by staff, the leadership, facilitator, or trainer now teaches, develops skills, or provides a pathway towards how to handle these same scenarios with a different approach that accomplishes two things: simultaneously de-escalates and resolves the conflict and also reduces the likelihood that a punitive consequence would be issued. Examples such as this were given in nearly all interviews. Harry shared:

I approached coaching through a lens of everybody has room to grow whether you are a new, novice or not, and to get a coach is a huge privilege and advantage. Like you should want to have somebody that can be a thought partner, that can give you non-evaluative feedback on a regular basis who can help push you and guide you throughout the year. So I led by example through the [Chicago Public Education] Fund advocated for myself, and I got a Coach so I was a partner principal and I had an Executive Principal attached to me as well.

Paula went in-depth, commenting:

...it was kind of interesting, because in the beginning, they were like, we don't need to do this. We're already culturally responsive, and we dig in to let them know it's not the child sitting in front of you, it's the child you're trying to engage that we have to work on. So we worked on some of those skills and strategies as well. A lot of PDs [professional development]. I'm a PD-aholic. I feel like if I could, I could show you and allow you to experience and learn more about it, then you're more likely to buy into it. Believe me, they were like 'why do we have to

sit on another training of this?’...I think just being super direct with them and letting them know like, hey, look, my jam is teaching and learning. And I want adults to believe in continuous learning. In any given school year, at the very least, you're gonna read a book, and that's the very least the amount of PD you're gonna get. And so, one of the big things that we also do is to make sure that we have the PD calendar to them like in August, so that there are no surprises.

It can't be understated how the utilization of research underlies this theme. While it was not explicitly discussed as an important factor in determining how to proceed with shifting school culture, there may be many reasons why this was not more directly called upon in the research interviews. It was interesting that though leaders did not call out the research itself in their responses, they did utilize them in every layer of their efforts to shift staff culture and develop new skills. This could arise as its' own theme, though it's part of the decision-making process utilized by school leaders.

When leaders are looking for solutions to an issue that aligns with their training, guidance, and policies, they are entrusted to uphold such as implementing, improving, and driving a school culture, school leaders turn to what works, meaning what has an impact. Knowing what works involves, for example, looking at what is occurring positively at other school sites, reaching out for guidance and advice from colleagues, mentors, advisors, or supervisors, reading research directly, or attending training. Thus, underlying all of these efforts is the evidence and research that developing an inclusive and restorative school culture versus one that is punitive and exclusionary where punishments are classified as *hard* and utilize philosophies such as zero tolerance for numerous behaviors is what improves school cultures (Benson & Fiarman, 2020; Gullo & Beachum, 2020; Khalifa, 2020; Lustick, 2017).

The promotion restorative social-emotional learning structures builds on this theme, while taking the theme in a new direction. While it involves the development of restorative, inclusive, culturally responsive skills in adults, it takes these to the next iteration: the training and implementation across the school. This involves the presence of student-facing activities, in what is commonly termed Multiple Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) amongst educators (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Evidence is present in all respondents for aspects of this structure, from universal curricula to targeted group-level programs to individualized and at times therapeutic interventions. Without fail, every example provided by school leaders in the interviews involved research-based strategies, which can commonly be found in schools nationwide.

The most common forms of a targeted student support structure referenced in the data were a variety of universalized approaches that set a foundation for how emotional wellness, behavior, discipline, and all forms of conduct would be managed across the school. Imagine a school principal determining that a packaged approach to aligning expectations, such as CHAMPs, Responsive Classroom, Leader in Me, or selected aspects of Teach Like a Champion would be implemented school-wide. These school leaders then either purchase or develop local training to help all staff utilize these methods with support and fidelity, being held accountable to do so and redirected or addressed if not seen in daily practice. The training involves all staff, including those who may not typically interact with students directly throughout the day, such as custodians and kitchen staff. These pieces of training are typically focused on positive behaviors, mindfulness, and a focus on the expected behaviors avoiding demeaning, condescending language, and managing the expected and undesired behaviors alike with dignity and care, such as hosting conversations in which harm and misbehavior are addressed through listening to the

student's perspective and addressing misbehavior in confidence. Various iterations of these programs existed across the answers of respondents, as the first layer of how behavior and emotions were managed in a social-emotional ethos.

Interestingly, one thing that was communicated from multiple responses within the concept of universal social-emotional learning supports, was the idea of spaces and placement in various forms. Examples of this included spaces such as a room (oftentimes titled with a moniker utilizing the school mascot, such as the "Lion Den") in which students, groups, or the whole class could go for a wellness activity that may involve resolving the tension that emerged within the class, and hosting what is oftentimes called a *circle* where the class sits in the shape of a circle to neutralize power dynamics and give equal voice to all involved. Another space used by multiple respondents is a place in the classroom where students could go to re-focus, de-escalate, or opt to take a break. Spaces and placement also involved the location of specific terminology in classrooms, hallways, on persons (such as cue cards with recommended strategies), and throughout the school building that reinforced expectations, reminded of options in alignment with the school's expectations, or other forms of focusing on the desired behaviors.

Examples shared by participants include when Paula stated:

We created this checklist, whereas if these behaviors are happening, these are classroom behaviors, and we gave teachers strategies for dealing with these classroom behaviors themselves; we instituted in every classroom a calm corner so that they can make sure that students are getting heated, they can go somewhere they could go and cool down...then we instituted our PBIS, and started to gather the student voices like, what do they want in their classroom [incentive] store?

Ned shared, “I brought different programs, like Beyond Differences. You know, they have different, wonderful programs, such as No One Eats Alone, and things like that.” Patrice shared her structure, commenting:

We did Calm Classroom, and we still do the Calm Classroom...as intentional thought processes before the behavior popped off...the other thing is one of my expectations across the board was that teachers created spaces in their room for children, to [self-correct disruptive behaviors] so one of the Kindergarten teachers, in the back of her room she had a little peace sign and when you pulled it, the light was on the space was occupied, the two little kits would go in the back of the room and hold the conversation, talk to each other. She had the little prompts on the wall...then when they had resolved their conflict they would just pull the little ball for the switch, the light will go out and then they move back into their [learning] spaces.

Positive behavior programming deserves its’ own highlight within this theme. A systematic approach to supporting positive behaviors is adjacent to the MTSS structure. Specifically, the PBIS program is what is most commonly referenced when describing what and how positive behavior support programs become implemented (Horner et al., 2020). While multiple respondents referenced this approach, it is a nod to the intentionality and design of the system itself that it should be organically adapted to the needs of each site versus a prescribed approach. Since interventions and programs are not discussed in depth in these results, the details of the PBIS are left to their evidence-based research. Instead, a highlight should be shared as to the nature of what was shared by research participants: it was repeated how PBIS was used in different ways in each school in which this topic arose. Regularly scheduled celebrations, raffles,

eligibility for students in which they needed to meet certain behavior-based criteria to participate, and incentivization of behaviors for students of all ages are some of the hallmarks of a well-designed PBIS approach and discussed in interviews.

In the data, there was a scant mention of targeted and individualized support for students. While omissions in the data may occur for many reasons, one rationale for this may be due to the nature that the interview was limited in questions, time, and scope and that a focus in the questions on large-scale changes in the school culture may preclude responses that focus on the efforts made to affect the entire student body. Regardless, it should be noted that omission in the data does not signify whether or not these structures were present or if so, in what form they existed in the identified schools. It may also be that school principals, who by nature of their work take on many roles, typically delegate responsibilities of small group work and individualized structures to key individuals. When interviewed principals mentioned the staff that typically manage targeted group and individual interventions, such as related service providers that include the social worker and psychologist or a unique school-determined role such as a restorative justice coordinator, there were hints and suggestions of the work that they had done in their role with specific groups and individuals. These service providers were also critical in helping develop and implement the staff training and acquiring resources for use with staff and students, in multiple sites as shared in the interviews. Larry shared:

...working with the related service providers is very important. I've learned a lot having a social worker who has a lot of techniques on how to destress and de-escalate situations...they give you a lot more support than you can realize and they can talk to the teachers on a different level so I did have them lead training.

## **Shifting Momentum to a Sense of Belonging, Across School**

It's critical in this research to note how data revealed evidence of a shifting of the entire school culture over time, towards one of inclusiveness and belonging for students and families. Though aspects of this theme are present in other themes, it is centered here in unique aspects. Consider how, at the baseline onset of the study as identified in the Interview Instrument, the school culture changed from the beginning to the end of this period. This should come as no surprise, as the data utilized to identify research participants recognized that a change had occurred in these specific schools, resulting in a significant reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions issued to Black students. Thus, something changed, and this research study investigated the details of that change.

Many factors were involved in this perceived shift, found in the data of the respondent interview responses. The hiring of new staff aligned with a vision alignment with that of Chicago Public Schools towards being student-centered, allowing for student voice and perspective, and shifting away from the use of suspensions as a form of punishment. Whether it be in the interview process, the onboarding of new employees to mold them to fit the desired culture of the school or pairing them with staff who would mentor and raise them towards the development of a mindset that fits with the future direction of the school, examples of all the above were present in nearly all responses given by respondents. In one instance, this included direct mention of recent hiring practices by Chicago Public Schools to target hiring to high-needs neighborhoods, in which the ability to hire highly qualified teaching candidates went from a struggle to one in which multiple strong resumes and subsequent hires took place due to these efforts. Many schools such as this across Chicago Public Schools, being labeled and identified, were thus targeted with the specific effort to hire and retain high-quality teachers, who also

aligned with the district vision. This added layers of quality control to a process that usually involves school principals and their staff having the autonomy to hire teachers and other staff without any formal process required. This was from Harry, and he shared:

Opportunity Schools was a very specific approach toward hiring and retention, making sure that schools that have had difficulty with hiring and retention were getting significantly enhanced support from the Talent Office. This meant that the Talent Office was specifically recruiting for these under-resourced schools. Having them hand [us] an entire portfolio of candidates that were pre-screened, and then connecting those candidates to these opportunities...all of a sudden the quality of candidates I was receiving was just massively different than what I had received just looking at the layout. So that made a huge impact in just my ability to hire.

Another aspect of this shift involves efforts made by school leaders to address inequitable practices. One notable example of this involves the role of the school leader, regardless of their length of tenure at the school, to directly confront and call out harmful practices. Sometimes these practices had been ingrained in the culture of the school for years, and sometimes it was more acute, specific, timely, and recent. Sometimes the practices were directly in violation of district policies, such as how adults may have confronted children in the moment of an altercation. School leaders at times resorted to the specific step of confidential conversation, which may have led to disciplinary actions based on the allegation. Further examples include discriminatory and derogatory language used by adults either directed towards or about students, whether in their presence or not, signifying thoughts about those students. Ned shared how students gave feedback that they had been yelled at by adults. Harry had commented, "...they're



not going to harm children [under my leadership],” along with, “Be able to manage your class, but not if it means harming children.” Shelly commented how she had to state to her staff, “Okay, we're just like perpetuating stereotypes, you know,” and how she had to address it.

A deeper layer of adult mindsets manifested in several responses, including the prevalence of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). One unique version of this included a deep form of empathy in one example in which staff at Helen’s school, many of whom lived in the same neighborhood as the school and the families, sympathized with the lived experiences of the students and attempted to make excuses as to why higher results were not possible for these students. While this came from a place of love and care to the reality that many had faced, it created barriers that were addressed by the school leader to shift a focus towards *no excuses* towards high expectations and results. More commonly in the data, the deficit thinking was related to excuses and blame placed on the low results as related to the behaviors of students.

Interestingly, this also took the form of an interview response of an indirect correlation with increased test scores. In more than one response, academic outcomes had improved but disciplinary infractions had also increased. While one aspect of a positive school culture had improved, the other aspect had increased in the wrong direction, resulting in a response from the school leader. While it’s not exactly clear as to the reason for the increased academic outcomes in these scenarios without a deeper dive into the academic results of each school site, it should be lauded that school leaders did not rest on the improvement of these academic results at the sacrifice of the potential for school climate improvement for the sake of student belonging.

This shift of momentum was met with resistance in all sites, but the form of resistance varied. In some situations, the resistance was due to conflict with individuals or their mindset, and something that the school leader chose to address with that person. It was hard for

respondents to stay within the timeframe in question, as issues of trust related to union negotiations (which were before and subsequently after the time frame in question) including the strike in the fall of 2019 and work stoppages related to the pandemic. Though, these were omitted from being directly included in this data and thus this theme. Still, the mention of the union arose in responses from multiple interviewees, as less a conflict with the union proper, and as interpreted by this researcher, more a tactic on the part of individuals resistant to change to clutch to rules either within the Board of Education, the union, or other perceived protected rights. For example, a teacher who is feeling threatened or unwilling to comply with a directive by their supervisor may grasp a rationale as to why their status quo is not only acceptable but protected. The fact that these sorts of interpersonal conflicts made it into the data for this research shows that school leaders made a conscious effort to address the mindsets and policies supported by some staff, even if it meant confronting not only these individuals but also either their representation within a group such as a union or other form of groupthink that was attempting to subvert change. About this, Helen had commented, “Sometimes you have poisonous staff that will kind of contaminate folk, and reaps discourse and division, and sometimes, when folk leave, there's a shift, and because some people some staff keep up the mess.” Bertha opened up about a difficult staff member she inherited that she had to address his behaviors to the point where he decided to move on to another school, “And so when he lost that power, he decided to move as well as his 4 5 followers but I say, hey, I still have 90% on board. We're good to go, and so that was the dynamic I walked into.”

Related to resistance, oftentimes, it was evident that school leaders took on these responsibilities at their self-sacrifice for wellness. As one can imagine, the resistance that comes with having to revisit, revise, and change course toward certain goals can wear and take a toll on

anyone. The leaders in this study have all led not only through challenging times as they shifted their staff and school culture as part of this study, but have all been at their school throughout a pandemic that was notably challenging on the mental and emotional health of everyone.

Several respondents also included the voice of students, directly. Surveys, interviews, and anecdotes of students stating that they did not feel respected heard, or valued by their teacher can be resisted by adults but is real information that is visible and real. Though this is discussed more deeply in a later theme below, it initially arises here in this theme as related to shifting momentum toward the sense of belonging that students will feel included when they feel heard and perceive that they are valued based on their inherent identity. This is a key point to note in the emergence of a culture of belonging, that this trait was increasingly noted throughout the period in question, as opposed to at the initial moment before data was collected.

Another aspect of universalized support that does drill down to individual students, as present in the data, involved the evolution of adult and student relationships. When adults are hearing from students, in caring relationships, a sense of belonging develops. While responses oftentimes related to the universalized school-wide approach to shifting school culture, this aspect was specific and unique.

There was a strong focus in multiple respondents on the concept of connection and connecting. That effect is genuine, and not forced when it occurs successfully. In these roles, while how relationships may have developed is sometimes associated with the universalized structures listed above, the discourse and evolution of one-to-one relationships between adult and student is truly an authentic and tailored thing between these two people in particular. Larry gave examples of how his staff manages behavioral situations utilizing existing positive relationships between staff and students, commenting:

[if] a kid was having a meltdown or an issue in a hallway, the teacher would try to address it, and if they didn't know the kid and didn't have a relationship with them it wouldn't go well. Well, after working with a social worker, we started sending out routine emails to the staff; if you don't have a connection with the kid and there's a student having an issue...make sure that you know if they're safe, keep them at distant. Be aware and do not engage. Let somebody please know that someone's on their way.

He then went on to describe how this structure allowed for staff who had relationships with the students to be the ones to help de-escalate and support them. Patrice added:

So for us, it became like hey, you know, we're gonna build relationships. If we're going to build restorative practices, then we need to be at a place of forgiveness.

Show a kid where they made the error, forgive, and move forward.

Bertha quoted how her efforts shared throughout her interview helped show in school culture survey results, by summarizing her efforts with her ultimate goal of establishing positive relationships commenting, "I think all of those things led to having a student, friendly climate and culture. It made the relationships with our teachers and students better."

Explicit examples of how relationships benefited students in direct combination with the concept of student discipline were myriad. This included reflections from school leaders noting how students felt better about themselves when they felt connected to adults and felt appreciated for who they are, throughout the school. These students are more likely to open up about issues they are experiencing, and then thus create opportunities for those issues to be heard, addressed, and possibly solved by either that adult or someone whom that adult connects the student with for further assistance.

A specific note about adult and student relationships involved de-escalating situations. For this to occur, it's not a prerequisite for the student to feel a sense of safety with each adult who may address them in times of crisis or escalated emotional need, but it's interesting to note that multiple respondents gave accounts of this exact scenario. When adults have relationships with students, they are more effective at helping that student redirect their emotions in a way that neutralizes and calms the situation for the student and all involved. This involves other themes related here, such as the concept of empathy to not discipline a student who may be violating various school rules, while understanding that the nature of the behavior at that moment and likely at other times as well stem from some form of either emotional or physical harm that the child has experienced, and not an intent to further that harm by perpetuating it but rather instead a cry for help from the school. When adults empathize with this need from students, it shifts the focus from punishment to help. Concepts of forgiveness, understanding, student voice, being heard, and privacy (for times in which sensitive information is being shared, or giving privacy when a student is exhibiting behaviors that may leave them feeling judged by their peers), was prevalent in the data. This also involved staff being given sentence stems and exemplary phrases to use in certain situations such as when to de-escalate and how to resolve conflict either between peers or between staff and students, as shared by Helen in the quote above.

The discussion around adult-to-student interactions took the form of various structures in which the relationships occurred. Sometimes the interface was authentic, occurring in the classroom between teacher and student throughout the dynamic of a typical school day. This fostering of a relationship over time gives way to an ability to respond in good times as well as tough times for the student. It also came about in the data hearing examples of instances structured where students could either opt to speak with an adult when they had some form of

identified emotional need or when sent to meet with an adult possibly for a behavioral infraction. Regardless of the rationale for the meeting, the conversation that occurs between the adult and student was shared frequently in the data as a chance encounter for a restorative, student-focused interaction in which the adult could hear and validate the perspective of the student and make in-the-moment decisions or follow up and follow through later on how to care for the needs of the child. Harry shared:

I would attribute that to the connections that students were feeling with teachers, and when there are good relationships between students, and faculty and staff members, not only do students feel better about who they are and what they're doing and what their future looks, like but teachers feel very similar they feel better about who they are and why they do what they do.

Shelly commented about how their school's culture had shifted, "Students should see that every single adult in this building cares about them. And so nobody bothered to [before]. Really, people weren't really spending the time getting to know kids and spending time with kids and listening to kids." Patrice commented, "So for us, it really became like, hey, you know, we're gonna build relationships. If we're going to build restorative practices, then we need to be at a place of forgiveness show a kid, where they made the error forgive, and move forward."

A culture of care is what was being fostered across all research sites in some form. In some instances, this was explicitly noted by school leaders in both their responses and in their recollection of messaging in their schools. In other instances, it was more organically derived from their responses, as they noted how they looked for instances and trends in how students did not receive the support they needed to thrive. Influencing and working across different stakeholder groups, leaders discussed how they pursued and challenged whenever they saw

students harmed or neglected. Harry commented, “They’re not going to harm children...” referring to the adults in his building. He added:

I did not shy away from writing them up and holding them accountable and every single situation. That person was no longer in the building the following year and moving forward, so I think making sure that we have schools, where teachers who are actively Counter to what we would expect in a teacher.

### **Salient Point: Development of Engaging Teaching Abilities**

In addition to the themes listed herein, the mention of the development of engaging teaching abilities was present but infrequent, though that may be likely due to the nature of the survey being focused on the school culture and climate and not explicitly focused on instruction. Regardless, it could not be overlooked as a factor in improving outcomes that result in Black students being more included and holistically successful in school.

Harry focused on the Framework for Teaching, specifically the aspect that mentions what is commonly referred to as the gradual release model of instruction, by building student skills by modeling, allowing them to practice with monitoring and feedback, before allowing them greater independence to implement the skills with less oversight. It was mentioned that to have kids carry the cognitive load, a teacher has to remove their intense focus on managing behaviors. They defined this as a turn toward academics so that the benchmark of what defines a great teacher, as defined by the Framework for Teaching, would become something that teachers would strive for in their pedagogy. Per that leader, this resulted in a more student-centered and student-owned classroom environment for behaviors and academics, as students had greater autonomy and voice in all aspects of their learning, and thus was more intrinsically motivated to engage in their education and less likely to be distracted or disengaged. Furthermore, a student-

centered approach to how school culture is defined and designed was echoed by multiple respondents. Interestingly, student-centered and student-led structures are present across the CPS Framework for Teaching. He commented:

...if teachers put the instruction to the wayside because they don't have obedient robots in front of them, then you're always gonna focus on behavior and you're never gonna get out of that feedback cycle, because it's just like it is going to be something where someone's like okay, well, I have control over this so I'm afraid to let go. So we pushed for a gradual release model. I can't have kids carry the cognitive load because I'm just worried about losing control of the classroom. No. We're gonna turn toward academics, so some of my very best teachers, who are micromanagers of behavior I'm like you gotta step out of the way. Through [the teacher evaluation process], I'm like you're not gonna hit [the highest evaluation rating] because you are micromanaging everything like, let go. Let the kids hold each other accountable, and don't sweat the small stuff. It's okay.

Larry framed his entire reflection on the interview questions and how their school's culture shifted to reduce the number of Black student suspensions around the topic of instruction. This led to two major reflections being shared by this leader: The increase in engaging instruction and a focus on high expectations. In both areas, this principal kept returning to instruction in his responses. When all other respondents were asked about school culture and climate, their responses hovered around behavior, social-emotional learning, and the interactions of individuals or stakeholder groups in their school. Larry always included or focused primarily on instructional methods, even when discussing social-emotional learning methods. He shared how strategies such as student goal setting, spending more time with students in small groups



versus whole class instruction, and intentional activities that were meant to excite and grab the attention of students were implemented during this timeframe and had a notable impact on how students saw themselves as learners. This is the primary rationale for what this school leader believes improved their school's culture and climate, and also had increased outcomes for academic achievement. Similarly, student peer mentoring and tutoring were briefly mentioned in at least one interview as other forms of academic and caring cultural support within groups of students. A comment he shared includes, "...maybe it was our second year of Guided Reading implementation at that time, and I remember that being a big deal because we were working with people from Fountas and Pinnell and small group instruction became very important."

### **Summary**

The primary purpose of this study was to provide summarized and thematically identified examples of what school leaders in Chicago Public Schools perceive were the actions that resulted in a reduction in Black student suspensions. An analysis of the qualitative data gathered through eight interviews was presented in this chapter. It focused primarily on the collection and analysis of these interviews with school principals in Chicago Public Schools, centered around their experience as school leaders from 2016 to 2019 and what occurred in their schools during that time that they perceive resulted in a noted reduction in Black student suspensions. The two research questions above guided this research and resulted in nine targeted questions that were included in the Interview Instrument, which can be found in Appendix B. As participants shared their responses to the questions that made up the Interview Instrument, it was noticeable that they were able to reflect with specificity and nostalgia about their leadership during the period requested. Since the theoretical framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership was selected, it allowed for a focus on aspects of drawing on leadership practices that center student

culture and their lived experience when attempting to discern what factors made a positive impact on Black student discipline outcomes. Aspects of the framework used to look for themes included critical self-awareness, critiquing inequitable practices, culturally responsive teacher development, promoting equitable practices, and trusting adult-to-adult relationships.

Overall, the data and findings of the current research study demonstrate the importance of focusing on school culture and climate, including practices that align with Chicago Public Schools Board of Education policy and following Illinois state law. More specifically, what research says about efforts that adults in schools can do to reduce the number of Black student suspensions was noted in various forms across all interviews. Causation is not confirmed in studies such as this, while strong evidence exists for reliance upon the efforts of these school leaders as being the rationale for aspects of what resulted in improved Black student discipline outcomes.

When the responses were captured and studied using the methodology described in the last chapter through the lens of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, after coding them to determine commonalities among respondents, four themes were identified. These themes suggest ways in which school leaders may look to the successful work of others for guidance on how to proceed in their unique site. Again, these themes are: (1) Ethic of Workplace Trust; (2) Shifting Mindsets: Out with Old Exclusionary and Punitive Habits, In with New Inclusive and Restorative Adult Habits; (3) Misconceptions and Re-Education Towards Restorative Practices; and (4) Shifting Momentum to a Sense of Belonging, Across School.

Related to workplace trust, school leaders shared how participants took time to build relationships, listen to, and empathize with their staff to foster this ethos. When addressing shifting mindsets away from exclusionary practices and habits to newly restorative ones,

respondents involved examples such as how the school leader addressed punitive actions when they were observed. Increasing a focus on restorative practices through modeling, training, and encouragement of the whole staff, groups, or individuals who showed a need for growth or were resistant would benefit from coaching in this area. For misconceptions and re-education that were deemed necessary by a school leader, these leaders took action by clarifying and unscrambling the miseducation of their staff through training and utilizing research to counteract and contradict previously held notions. In shifting momentum to a sense of belonging, school leaders provided examples of how they emphasize their school's plans and strategies involving creating spaces to listen, empathize with, and deepen connections with students, most notably through creating spaces for students' voices. When discussing how they promoted restorative social-emotional learning structures, leaders employed research-based interventions through training and implementation, along with accountability for use with their staff across all aspects of the school in classrooms, common areas, lunchrooms, recess, and more so that there were universal and targeted approaches. As leaders were hearing from students and fostering caring relationships, they stressed the importance of the power the collective work can have when staff has relationships with their students, and going further to highlight how avoiding this as a priority will mean that a vital component to a strong school culture is missing. Developing engaging teaching strategies helped foster a positive school environment beyond and in conjunction with the social-emotional learning structures that are necessary, and were emphasized by school leaders in different ways. These collective efforts, as evidenced by the responses of the principal participants, were the actions they perceive to have improved their school cultures and reduced the number of Black student suspensions.

As leaders shared their perspectives on their experiences from three to five years ago, all of them were able to do so fondly concerning the work they did. Their reactions clearly showed pride and joy in their work, as well as frustration in the challenges they faced and the stress this causes. It was impressive to see all leaders not only give the time to participate in a project such as this, but also the amount of detail that they were able to share about the work that took place before the pandemic which overloaded us all with information to be learned, mastered, and implemented. The highlight of this process was to see the immense positivity in the reactions of participants, as they were able to sit with the emotions of the powerful impact they have made on the lives of students.

The data collected from principal participants in this study provided incredible insight into their leadership mindsets, approaches, decision-making process, and adaptability based on challenges they faced as they pursued a mission of reducing the number of Black student suspensions. It should be mentioned that the same efforts that these leaders made throughout their efforts during this period can be utilized by others. Addressing the mindsets of individuals and groups of adults alike, through training or direct interaction, while shifting practices through various means, can be utilized in localized manners in any school, and should be seen as a framework for what can affect a school culture resulting in a reduction in Black student suspensions. The next chapter expands upon this concept, containing a summary of the findings, implications of the findings from this study, and recommendations for future research to continue to contribute and deepen the research on this very important topic.

Keeping students in school and helping them realize the vision and mission that we as school leaders and all stakeholders have established with and for them, there is no greater purpose to which we commit. As readers of this study should note, whatever actions are taken

with the mission of improving Black student outcomes are undertaken, it has the potential to change lives. The experiences of school leaders, as they reflected upon and shared their experience and journey doing the same, should serve as recommendations, guidance, and at times cautionary advice that will be discussed further for use by others in chapter 5.

## CHAPTER V: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

### **Summary of Findings**

Throughout this chapter, confident yet cautious recommendations are given, to both give support to the findings as shared by interviewees while also granting that other factors may remain uncovered or unacknowledged. A final centering of the research questions is important at this time, and as such, they are stated below.

1. What school leadership practices enacted by Chicago Public Schools elementary school principals are present in the reduction of Black student suspensions?
2. In what ways were the teachers engaged to show evidence of the reduction of Black student suspensions?

To answer these research questions, I interviewed eight school administrators who have been leading their schools since at least 2016. Each interview lasted between 30 and 70 minutes and was the primary interaction by which to gather data. While other information can be gathered on each research participant by looking at their school's newsletters, and websites, and by visiting their school and interacting with their staff and community, those methods were not part of this research study. Instead, the intimate and candid nature of confidential interviews provided unfettered access to the thinking and reflections of a school leader in ways that the politics and communal public nature of other settings such as at an open event would not have revealed. Thus, the format of interviews is the exclusive method of data gathering. Their interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative coding process (Saldaña, 2021). Following coding, the themes were selected and gave rise to the recommendations in this chapter.

This study hoped to discern, most notably, leadership practices and the dynamic between school leadership, staff, and students. The role of families was tangential to the research but came through multiple times. While much has been written about the impact of research-based interventions, teaching strategies, approaches, and resources, these were also only partially related to the main purpose of the research (Kramer; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). The use of all these techniques is what makes the difference happen in schools, and where an impact can be seen. For this to happen, though, changes are required. Changes, in this context, come in the form of shifting actions, habits, behaviors, and mindsets on the part of adults, as the various leaders and staff in a building have agency and authority to enact change (Hamilton et al., 1961; Lewin, 1947; Shotter, 1998). The findings from this study contribute to the body of research regarding what works in shifting school cultures from one in which Black students are receiving suspensions at higher rates than cultures in which Culturally Responsive School Leadership practices result in more inclusion of students and improved student discipline outcomes (Eberhardt, 2020; Evans, 1996).

As we dive deeper into what was revealed in the findings, several concepts appear. Through a series of coding and thematic analysis, four themes were identified. The themes that surfaced from the interviews include: (1) Ethic of Workplace Trust; (2) Shifting Mindsets: Out with Old Exclusionary and Punitive Habits, In with New Inclusive and Restorative Adult Habits; (3) Misconceptions and Re-Education Towards Restorative Practices; and (4) Shifting Momentum to a Sense of Belonging, Across School.

The central elements of the theoretical framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership helped identify the themes. Again, these were (1) critical self-awareness, (2) critiquing inequitable practices, (3) culturally responsive teacher development, (4), promoting

equitable practices, and (5) trusting adult-to-adult relationships (Khalifa et al., 2016). These framework components gave rise, organically, to not only the themes but categories that transcend and help group the themes.

### **Relationships**

A strong focus evident in the themes was relationships. The relationship between the school leader and their staff, that of the staff and their peers, and between all adults and students was an interesting triangulated dynamic that intersected in myriad ways. The overarching term for this was that of trust. There are many ways to define trust, and it was evident here most notably as an authentic feeling that goes beyond articulate definition. If the receiving individual felt qualities including but not exclusively those of care, honesty, sincerity, and confidence, they may also feel that intangible quality of trust. Leaders modeled this, as a new school culture was emerging in their schools (Bryk, 2010; Bryk and Schneider, 2003; Lencioni and Stransky, 2002). Sometimes charismatic, sometimes stoic and direct, sometimes honest and sincere, how a leader approached the building of a new way of behaving to shift student behavioral outcomes seemed authentic to each leader's identity, personality, and leadership style. Thus, it should be noted that there is no clear way in which leaders should attempt to enact change with respect to staff dynamics. There is no one prescribed method, but rather it's more important for a leader to be genuine and connect as a human to their staff.

How leaders lead and bring themselves and their abilities to the landscape of the school environment sets a tone. Their policies and actions have real implications, but before shifting gears to the specifics of decisions, sitting with and reflecting on their presence is enough to see how this resonates and results in a model for what is expected for staff and students. Accountability with empathy and an attitude of no excuses, or excuses being addressed through



action, became how leaders shared how they addressed their staff and by proxy, how their staff addressed students. Relationships need to be authentic on all levels.

Extending beyond the relationships, the remaining results were profound and truly had a more direct impact on adult behaviors. This all revolved around the concept of shifting habits and mindsets. This took place through a directive, through training, via an awakening of the individual, or through the evolution of one's ability to teach in the many ways that can be defined. Regardless, once relationships were established, this became more possible, likely, cyclical, and developed momentum.

Habits and practices are the point of impact that is either the source of conflict and tension versus holistic care and support. This is the make-or-break moment between a restorative culture and something in which harm is caused to a student or staff. Resorting to the research question, the focus is on engaging the teacher, along with leadership practices. Much has been written and presented in the literature review of this writing about the work of others when interventions and strategies are implemented. These efforts by educators to reduce exclusionary practices and improve culturally responsive, inclusive practices for students of color combined with cultural awareness and cultural education for adults led to closing student discipline gaps (Benson & Fiarman, 2020; Kramer, 2000; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). Here, we focus on the dynamic between formal school leaders and their staff, and the results of that force.

In all schools, something changed during this period. While some leaders had a longer tenure that preceded the start of the 2016-17 school year, others took the principalship at their school around this time and thus their presence and approach differing from their predecessors can be explained at least as part of the change in approach. Regardless, changes were present in all schools, related to practices and habits.

## **Training**

Concerted efforts to enact change tell the story of what happened in these research sites. Leaders implemented pieces of training that were tailored to the situational needs of their staff. These pieces of training were school-wide, targeted towards groups, and individualized. These were planned, spontaneous, and adaptable to situational needs that evolved. It was clear that this occurred uniquely in each site, due to all of the dynamic factors of each school involving staff, tenure, demographic, and mindset. Each leader was able to help demonstrate how the training and teachings they supported were tailored to the needs of their school's community.

This training involves rollout, implementation, supplementation, and follow-through on the part of all individuals, notably the leaders overseeing the process itself. Facilitators engage with staff to implement training or staff leave the school site to attend external training. This initially develops the skill. Then, the skill is theoretically used, knowing that it catches traction only happens if those skills are utilized. So, a school leader sees this in action through direct observation combined and triangulated with evidence of the work across all facets of the school. This was either shared directly or indirectly through references made by research participants. The concept of utilization with fidelity is something that is an ideal goal in this realm. The degree to which these newly developed skills are utilized is what will show in the results (Sleeter, 2001; Toure & Dorsey, 2018).

As provided in the evidence, the training referenced was at times about behavior and emotions, and at times about academic engagement. For example, in chapter 4, it was mentioned that respondents had implemented CHAMPs or Teach Like a Champion. While both are considered beneficial to classroom environment and social-emotional wellness, they also provide structures that directly benefit student intrinsic motivation and focus. When students are more

involved in their learning, they are more engaged and will have a greater chance of success. Thus, they intertwine behavioral and academic engagement. It's impossible to entirely untangle the two concepts, as they are intertwined in the on goings of a school. As such, it should come as no surprise that certain school leaders in their interviews shared about the academic training, support, and growth evident in their schools. While the focus of this study is on behavioral outcomes, the inputs and outputs alike are oftentimes related to the academic side of schooling. As teachers grow in their teaching practices at large, they develop pedagogy, behavioral management strategies, techniques for managing emotions, and more. These do not develop in silos, and thus the sharing out of school leaders discussing how they supported the development of their staff's abilities varied (Cook et al., 2018).

In addition to training, the actions of these leaders were profound. Participants reflected on how they addressed individuals when they exhibited unacceptable behaviors of adults that violated the moralistic expectations or explicitly stated policy guidelines. They held firm on their principled expectations and worked with individuals to help them either find a new place to stake their career in or out of teaching or schools themselves and made it known that there were non-negotiable standards to be met.

Coaching and mentoring surfaced, unsurprisingly, as skills utilized by school leaders. This should be expected, as supervisory skills such as these are emblematic and expected of school leaders. They are embedded in the leadership standards across the profession (Heifetz, 1994). School leaders in this study shared examples of how they either directly mentored and helped foster the growth of their staff, or built an infrastructure for this to flourish through distributed leadership.

The chosen focus of school leaders in the training, development, mentoring, coaching, and various other forms of growth envisioned across the school community was directed to a vision of exactly what was at the heart of the research questions: what leadership actions drive the reduction of Black student suspensions? Leaders provided examples of maintaining high standards for students, which in turn keeps them learning and engaged in school, able to tangibly see a bright future for themselves. These respondents provided examples of calling out deficit thinking mindsets and excuses such as blaming external factors for why students underperformed academically or exhibited certain behaviors (Valencia, 2010).

### **Motivating Change**

What was the impetus for change in the actors themselves? What changes hearts and minds? This appeared as a sense of drive for leaders, though it was never explicitly stated. It can be imagined that the hinge point for habitual change in school staff is when they either individually or collectively as a group realized that change was not only important but beneficial to someone.

Change in action is beneficial for the students, as evidenced in myriad studies in the literature review of this research, as it keeps students in school, engaged, feeling a sense of connectedness to their school, and gives a greater outlook on future opportunities in school and later in life. This happens through cultural responsiveness amongst other concepts. Sometimes this occurs in how we perceive our students, as either disruptive or very socially engaged and how we utilize their learning excitement (Morris, 2005). Sometimes this happens when we change our preconceived notions about which types of students will be successful or interested in certain subjects and careers (Ibrahim et al. 2021). Ignoring this will likely lead to a lack of engagement, which is how the School-to-Prison Pipeline manifests (Hatt, 2011a; Shirley, 2013).

Going down this path, if we ignore the changes needed, we exacerbate the myriad challenges students face, resulting in disconnect, including the Adverse Childhood Experiences that they face (Carver, 1975; Iachini et al., 2016; Kramer, 2000). Thus, adhering to and implementing changes in oneself and in those they lead that keep students in school is what has the desired effect of reducing exclusionary practices (Stewart, 2003).

Change in action and mindset is beneficial for adults as well, though this is contextual to the individual (Brazwell, 2018; Mendoza et al., 2010). What motivates the adult? Those who went into the profession to help improve the lives of students, though have habits that cause harm, can be reached through that vein. Those who went into this profession to teach a subject first and foremost have a different path toward motivation. Those who truly saw the various forms of trauma and adverse experiences faced by youth may be reached through a lens of empathy within the adult towards a glimpse into the support a child needs to persevere despite the challenges they face.

### **Use of Research**

Some staff was somewhat or deeply unaware of what research stated would have a positive impact on improving student behaviors. As teacher preparation programs and post-graduation teacher training throughout one's career varies as much as anything in the profession, it's not clear nor did it come through in the interviews to what extent school staff had been trained before the period of the study. As the focus of this study was on the actions of the school leaders and how they engage their staff, it was profound to hear the choices made by leaders regarding how to support the development of their staff regardless of the staff member's background and training. This helps provide evidence that there is no one-size-fits-all prescribed approach, but rather multiple pathways towards helping school staff come to a strong

understanding of what research states will have an impact and improve student discipline outcomes, whether it's explicitly stated or implied through the development of skills to be utilized across the school.

### **Reflectiveness**

Leaders in this study were reflective. Of course, the format of an interview encourages such behavior, but it was clear that the interview itself was a meta-level of reflection, built upon reflection that had occurred in the mind of the school leaders as they would sit and consider their situational needs before, during, periodically throughout, and after major stages of their school's cultural evolution journey. Shelly highlights this by commenting:

I've told them, you know, if you don't want me, then you don't need to have me here. If you don't like what I'm doing, just tell me. I've always tried to listen to them, because to me that that was what was important. Honestly, I saw out other schools that I wanted to be like, you know, where I saw the things happening at that school that I wanted to see happen at [our school] and I connected with that principal and my teachers...as well as me as an administrator, you know, coming in as a new administrator, just hearing some of the ideas and strategies from a veteran principal. I'm looking at their scores, you know, and I'll say, okay, this is who we want to be.

### **Facing Resistance**

The leaders who participated in this study took whatever means necessary to attempt to hit on that critical lever of change. When it happened, a shift was evident. When it was resisted, the leader fought back. Related to this, Helen shared:

Staff who had a difficult time with this, that was my job to let them know that yeah, this is required but let's talk about why this is important and so that had to come from me; it wasn't an initiative. It wasn't something that was pushed down from the network. This was something that was needed, and they needed to hear from me why this was important.

She shared that this was especially true for new staff. Shelly gave her perspective, stating, “I do have high expectations, and I understand that people have a hard day or have a bad day, but we can't let that impact our teaching and affect children.” When it seemed futile or not the most fruitful path forward, the leader oftentimes chose to help the adult seek other opportunities in another school, district, or career. In all forms, there was a clear commitment on the part of the leader to pursue change in the actions and minds of the adults.

Leaders should be praised for their perseverance in the face of challenges. Of course, this was a theme in the pandemic for all stakeholders as everyone in their respective roles overcame challenges involved with reinventing teaching and learning remotely as all were quarantined. During the times of this research study, which took place before the pandemic, leaders shared how they did what is expected of leaders: facing and overcoming challenges. The success of these leaders is evident in not only the publicly available data that helped identify them as research participants, but in the evidence shared especially as they discussed ways in which they encountered and persisted in the face of challenges that attempted to block the implementation of research-based actions that benefit students.

The resistance faced by school leaders and colleagues of staff resistant to change or otherwise exhibiting behaviors that perpetuate the School-to-Prison Pipeline may exist for any of the reasons listed above and are not a reflection on the individual itself (Anderson, 2017; Heifetz,

1994; Wu, S. C. et al., 1982). There are certainly caring, compassionate, heartfelt adults that are either at the center of any given school or possibly how all school staff in any site may be described. Despite their character and caring attitude, harmful behaviors may be evident. This actualized set of actions as presented by any given adult is what the leader is addressing. As a result, when the adult in question is being impacted, it is their behavior that may change, not their self. The leader is attempting to tap into the person, using skills developed through various forms, to cause a shift and help that person come to a realization and find a new path forward. This aligns with research presented in chapter 2, which focused on the unfreezing of past practices as changes occur, followed by a refreezing into new practices that are adhered to by those who have experienced the internal impetus for change (Lewin, 1947). Additionally, mastery experiences were discussed in chapter 2 and evidenced in the responses of principal participants in chapter 4 as they highlighted ways that school staff developed new skills and improved them to the point where they became habits that were regularly present and utilized for the benefit of students (Forman et al., 2017). The following section proposes recommendations for future research and actions for implementation for specific roles and gives the rationale for the implications of this study.

### **Acknowledging Status of Chicago Public Schools and Urban Schooling**

First, a nod to the leadership of Chicago Public Schools. It is by no accident that policies and resulting actions take place that results in the changes evidenced in this study. From top to bottom, the synchronicity of some form can be found. While the extent, stability, and infrastructure of leadership may evolve and continue to change over time, a line of continuity among all levels of leadership has helped result in the changes shared in evidence. Dating back before the implementation of SB100, which was enacted in 2015, Chicago Public Schools has



had a Code of Conduct which houses policies around student discipline that have strongly discouraged the use of suspensions and other exclusionary practices (Illinois Principals Association, 2015). The guidance has only become increasingly clear since then to focus on students' rights and responsibilities to frame the role of students as one that is both to be prioritized for accountability of support and high expectations. This has transcended and only grown through the transition of leadership from that of the Chief Executive Officer to the Executive Director of Social-emotional Learning to Network Chiefs across the city, and other related roles. Seemingly, only the high-level leadership role of Chief of Safety and Security role has been consistently held by the same person outside of the school level, as directly related to student discipline support. Throughout all of this changing guidance, many schools including some in this study, have continued on a trajectory toward developing inclusive, restorative practices.

Between urban, exurban, suburban, rural, and all types of defining communities, clear lines of distinction do not exist. In any urban area, being oftentimes defined by the demographic of mixing racial identities and proximity of students being able to walk to and nearby school within a city setting, some similarities can be found to the implications of this research. The School-to-Prison Pipeline is exacerbated in urban areas by conflating factors different than those in landscapes outside of urban settings. For example, the block-to-block culture in urban areas that can make gang tension both visible and real is something that manifests in a city differently than in other geographic spaces (Vanderhaar et al., 2014; Lhamon & Samuels, 2014).

Thus, district and community leaders in communities that consider themselves urban should take note of the exacting factors of this research first. Many items are replicable. The hyper-density of having students all live within walking distance is a reality of many research

sites in this study and is true for many other urban areas elsewhere. The realness of racial discrimination, especially pertinent in this study towards Black people in America, is something that may feel more similar in any city than it does in other countries. Leaders tackled this issue, and the effort to reduce the number of Black student suspensions and exclusion of any student is relevant both here in Chicago (Stevens et al., 2015; Barnum, 2018) as well as in schools across the nation (Cook et al., 2018; Gray, 2020; Williams et al., 2020; Brown, 2018; Gullo et al., 2019).

### **Recommendations**

The following includes pathways of recommendations for anyone involved in the formal roles in public school leadership: (1) principal preparation and training programs, (2) urban central office leadership, (3) central office leadership outside of urban areas, (4) universal recommendations, (5) and school level implications. Through the lens of each group charged with and accountable for positive outcomes as listed below, the findings above are restated and expanded upon as recommendations. All of these will be viewed through the theoretical framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership.

In chapter 2, the various ways in which the framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership can shift a school's culture were unpacked, and that is revisited here as it relates to the results of this study. Culturally Responsive School Leadership focuses on the actions, beliefs, and adaptiveness of the leaders in the school setting, which was noted in responses shared by school leaders regarding actions they took to implement what research tells us has an impact when attempting to increase inclusivity and reduce suspensions (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally Responsive School Leadership encourages the centering of student voices, especially those who are most impacted by disparate and discriminatory school practices, as a way to respond to the

needs of students. School leaders in this study gave multiple examples of both taking feedback from students and relationship building between adults and students that led to greater engagement in personal settings as well as instructional (Sharma & Christ, 2017). Culturally Responsive School Leadership demands that schools are inclusive in practice, and not just in policy, and it's clear that school leaders were able to provide myriad examples of the actionable, specific steps they took beyond simply sharing philosophies. They provided anecdotal evidence of not only their recollection of events but comments shared by staff and students regarding how there was an increased sense of inclusivity and that was tied directly to the efforts they made to interventions designed to be responsive to the needs of students and providing evidence-based interventions (Carter et al., 2022). Regarding the politics of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, competing values, ideologies, and perspectives in all contexts manifest in all stakeholders. Administrators provided examples of how they addressed groups and individuals, such as when they would meet to work through challenges with the staff unions or when they met with individuals to help make a case for needed improvement with support or a transition to a new setting that may be a better fit. The goal in all settings was to align adults around a vision and desired culture and to have all on board with this plan (Clayton, 2011).

### **Recommendation for Principal Preparation and Training Programs**

Those designing principal preparation and professional development programs should consider the extent to which leaders are prepared for and allowed to address the adaptive challenges of schools. How are school leaders being trained to deal with challenges that arise? What topics are utilized in this training? What authors are used to grounding and center the work? What projects and assignments allow school leaders in training to develop the necessary skills to lead staff through dynamic challenges such as the school leaders above?

Training principals centers around rubrics and standards. That being said, policies and guidelines are documents that can be utilized in a variety of ways. A professor, developer of training, or other individual leading training determines the frame in which they lead and teach. Considerations that should be made include curricular materials, additional standards and rubrics on top of core leadership standards, and the identities of those involved. Diving into the potential complications within this situation notes how a racially homogeneous group of staff and students may not truly reflect the demographic of whom they serve, and thus not center their experiences. Or, more broadly, may not echo the perspective of students in our country in other communities to ensure that marginalized voices are centered. Thus, looking at rubrics that foster diversity and equity alongside and on top of traditional leadership standards is essential. What theoretical and conceptual frameworks are used when deriving and developing syllabi and coursework? Does it take a critical lens to traditional schooling at both the university level and the P-12 landscape that public schooling educators serve? In which ways does this occur?

There is a direct through line between how leaders are prepared, how they implement training in schools, how the staff is led and supported in their ability to enact punitive or restorative and inclusive policies, and how students are affected and either drawn closer to being emotionally and academically supported or pushed out. There is a paramount need to take the needs of students who have faced discrimination, trauma, and other forms of bias and harm into direct consideration when planning leaders who supervise their schools. The leaders in this study justify this claim through their efforts, as evidenced by the fact that all eight research participants had simultaneously reduced the number of Black student suspensions and had done so with efforts that helped give rise to themes that involved strategies such as reducing exclusionary practices, increasing equitable strategies, and others as referenced in chapter 4. The inherent

problem that existed at their school before these changes were enacted was another set of data that could be captured if their efforts before the change had been studied in deeper ways. All school leaders receive formal training and are charged with implementing training that aligns with school priorities and goals. The degree to which teaching on race and culture is done using both historical examples and opportunities for self-reflection for both teachers and leaders is what research shows will likely shift mindsets, as supported by this research study (Abdi et al., 2020).

### **Recommendations for Urban Central Office Leadership**

Urban districts, oftentimes larger and more centralized than smaller and more geographically distant school districts, are more likely to have an infrastructure that behooves research-based guidance and expertise in specific categories. The larger, the more opportunity for departments to specialize in different categories. The more that these departments align around tenets of Culturally Responsive School Leadership when engaging with school leaders and those who directly impact student discipline outcomes, the more the results evident in this study will shine elsewhere. School leaders in this study have shown results that have helped their schools improve beyond reducing the number of Black student suspensions. Each school also showed a reduction in the total number of suspensions across all racial groups. Beyond quantifiable data, interviewees had much to share that showed how their schools improved their cultures over time. Harry stated:

I would attribute that to the connections that students were feeling with teachers, and when there are good relationships between students, and faculty and staff members, not only do students feel better about who they are and what they're

doing and what their future looks, like but teachers, feel very similar they feel better about who they are why.

Many of these positive cultural changes are still in place, as stated by Helen, commenting, “It started as a great year. The relationships with the teachers have been warm and we're receptive to feedback. It hasn't always been that way. Sometimes it's the dynamics of personalities in the building.” Patrice had a long retort in her reflection on her leadership as to how the leadership efforts resulted in culture change, noting:

For me to set the law be fair and stick with whatever it is that I have established as my role, and then move forward a lot is on children to see that you were consistent about your practices so it's just looking at the umbrella of all those pieces, but most importantly, understanding how important it is to forgive right and not just forgive, but have a child in your sights. You know, as Nike says, just do it. But just do what? And if you don't learn what it is that you must do, then you're gonna do anything, and get any, all kinds of results. So for us, it became like, hey, you know, we're gonna build relationships, if we're going to build restore the practices, then we need to be at a place of forgiveness show a kid, where they made the error forgive, and move forward so yeah. Gradually release work to students, and take ownership. And you have well-run classrooms because students have intrinsic motivation, and they're bought in or you go from yeah, like, the push out punitive culture, to relationship-driven.

Specifics of how to build out a system for student support that involves a low propensity for exclusionary practices involves much of what is present in Chicago Public Schools: a clear, aligned, and centralized policy from the Chief Educational Officer through to other departments, and disseminated in actionable ways across operational, instructional teaching and learning, and

networked departments. Whether a school leader is receiving guidance from a central office or a colleague, trainer, or supervisor in a regional office, the guidance should not contradict other information given.

The alignment of all information requires collaboration and communication (Morris, 2005). A diversity and equity office will likely liaise with a social-emotional learning director or their designee, which will likely coordinate with a safety team's leadership. All of these perspectives will likely either co-author or edit guidance that will be disseminated and trained in various ways to schools. Lack of follow-through or support to implementation with fidelity may lie in the work of a regional office, to see how policies and procedures are coming to life in a school setting. Adjacent structures such as a local police department, counseling, social work, crisis response, wraparound services, special education, and the various departments of teaching and learning are all related to how the work may proceed with resistance or alternately with collaboration. A human resources department likely has guidance on how new and current staff are trained on their abilities.

One important point is that, though there is a complicated and oftentimes negative use of policing in schools (Bolger et al., 2018; Merkwae, 2015; Weisburst, 2019; Brady et al., 2007), in Chicago Public Schools, elementary schools do not utilize on-duty police officers who have the authority to arrest. No research participant in this study mentioned police presence in their schools, and it's uncertain whether they have an off-duty officer and if so, how their role in this work may have manifested. This study did not focus on the role of police in the schools whose principals that participated in the study. This is an area that may be important for future study.

The coordination of efforts across different departments, offices, and within and across teams is the beauty of having such robust staffing and expertise, while simultaneously creating

challenges due to distance, different key fulfillments potentially not realized when roles are not filled or enacted as envisioned. Either way, this is a commitment that should be made by all individuals for the betterment of children (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

### **Recommendations for Central Office Leadership Outside of Urban Areas**

Schools do not exist in vacuums nor isolation from one another throughout their entirety, and thus the research listed in this study has implications for schools with staff and students of all backgrounds. Consider how, even if a school's student body is devoid of any Black students, the students and staff in that building will undoubtedly benefit from reading, absorbing, and implementing the guidance in this research (Pollock, 2008; Scheurich, 2003). For one, situations in which students have their voices heard, feel included, are supported through challenges they face, and are not excluded from school are situations that are beneficial for any student regardless of identity (Ritter & Lee, 2009).

A layer of cultural responsiveness that should be considered by the school and district leaders is one of inclusiveness on all fronts. School and district demographics can and likely will change over time. Students and staff will graduate or move on to new communities and interact with students of different backgrounds at some point in their life. Being responsive to the needs of students by learning their interests, passions, perspectives, and lived experiences even by reaching beyond the school and community is a valuable pursuit that helps go beyond the diversity of a community in ways that broaden horizons (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

Districts outside of urban areas may feel hampered by distance, transportation, or inherent demographic limitations, but should not be discouraged from learning about all cultures. Myriad resources exist from videos, technology that can be used to connect, travel opportunities,



and broader municipal ventures that help diversify a community to help it expand to one that is more metropolitan than previously known.

Today's students are the leaders of tomorrow. In an increasingly connectable global society, the expanding opportunities for connecting with others are a vital resource to tap into. Students should graduate with the skills to be able to interact, understand, and empathize with peers of all backgrounds, thus being culturally responsive to not only those in their presence but also developing skills that help them foster relationships with those whom they may encounter for the first time at any stage of their lives is a vital skill. Empathetic listening, perspective sharing, and broadening horizons are all elements of a diverse curriculum that helps go beyond a community that has a limited identity. In urban spaces, there are more direct and local resources for multicultural integration, and though these resources are harder to acquire comprehensively outside of dense communities, they are still accessible at least via technology (Warikoo et al., 2016).

### **Universal Recommendations**

At all levels of governance, policy, and implementation, a re-centering of all policies and procedures around the lived experience of students most directly impacted by harmful histories should occur. A way in which to do this, as presented in this research, is to center Culturally Responsive School Leadership. This is not recommended as a universal approach that works in one method similarly in all settings, but rather using the term universal as an overarching approach that should be adapted in any setting. When determining a path forward that would either reinforce supportive structures or correct policies that have proven in data and various outcomes to disparately harm Black students, a change is needed (Shotter, 1998). Culturally Responsive School Leadership is a relatively new and unconsidered framework, albeit grounded

in and related to Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness, it has strong bona fides regarding how it can build on the work of others as described in the literature review (Harris, 1993; Khalifa et al., 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2009).

The policy should be derived to correct inequities of all forms. The training and implementation of these policies should ensure that they are enacted as intended. The barriers faced by leaders should be challenged by utilizing overt and subversive efforts alike, to strive towards these fair and balanced outcomes. Any resistance to this should be fought, for the sake of students who suffer daily without these efforts.

This research highlights the use of Critical Whiteness (Harris, 1993) and Culturally Responsive School Leadership frameworks, along with the overarching concept of Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2009). It should be cautioned explicitly that if the work of aspiring to change school culture to one that focuses on reducing the number of Black student suspensions is not done through the frameworks of Critical Whiteness nor Culturally Responsive School Leadership, then the inherency in schooling in the U.S. is that Whiteness is our focus whereas this should not be the reality in schools in the U.S. since the majority of our students are not White. If leaders are not prepared to lead in diverse schools, then we are ignoring the disparities that perpetuate the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

### **School Level Recommendations**

School leaders or those advising leaders of school staff should take note of the challenges and successes as shared in this research, to help inform what works as reported by leaders in Chicago Public Schools, as well as pitfalls to acknowledge, avoid when possible, and overcome as needed. When focusing on how to address the School-to-Prison Pipeline and attempt to reduce student disciplinary suspensions, the framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership

should be considered as a method by which to be reflective as a leader and develop one's skills, along with the frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness in all types of schools.

Leaning into the framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, leaders should consult any writings on critical self-awareness. When a leader sits with this aspect of the framework, it gives rise to myriad reflections (Mendoza et al., 2010). Why is the school leader considering the importance of this research? How do they perceive that their actions have contributed to the perpetuation or disruption of the School-to-Prison Pipeline? How does their leadership of others influence and impact the behavior of those adults, and how do those adults thus impact the School-to-Prison Pipeline? What increase or decrease is there in the number of student suspensions, and what is the breakdown of this data point by race? While causation and correlation cannot be inextricably linked, to what extent does the school leader perceive that their actions have impacted the behavior of adults and students, and in what ways, positively or negatively? Reflecting on all of these questions helps enliven the same types of questions as embodied in the research questions of this study, and helps mirror the reflection that research participants were able to undergo while being interviewed.

This form during one's tenure as a school-level leader can help an individual determine if and how they believe that their leadership may or could evolve. Thinking in this way before one's role leading a school can help one prepare for the challenges ahead. The hindsight of looking back on how a leader has helped shape a school culture can be an interesting exercise in holistic self-critical feedback, and hopefully, something that the leader would take into their next role beyond this. In all forms of reflection, the leader places themselves in the role of practitioner

and action agent, with knowledge of the literature in this study arming them with the wisdom of what has shown to make an impact.

### **Compilation of Summarized Recommendations**

From the various roles listed above, individuals in their various roles can:

- Hold others accountable for following expected rules, procedures, and policies
- Address punitive habits of staff, colleagues, or others interacting with students
- Overcome challenging behaviors that may manifest in ways that are adjacent to the issue or directly related to them
- Focus on relationship development with students and staff
- Coach restorative habits in others
- Help foster a community of care for all
- Use data to reveal growth areas in any aspect of the school culture
- Confront and address deficit thinking that leaves low expectations behind
- Continue to maintain high academic standards
- Hire those with equitable, open, and empathetic mindsets
- Re-frame existing structures in ways that center the experiences of students
- Read, interpret, and utilize laws and policies such as Illinois' SB100 in ways that help promote inclusive school communities, avoiding punitive, exclusionary consequences
- Consider different levels of intervention for students, oftentimes referred to specifically as Multiple Tiered Systems of Support, to tailor research-based programs and strategies to help students when they need reinforcement and care
- Do work that attempts to shift mindsets from punitive tendencies to restorative, inclusive beliefs

- Administer surveys, host focus groups, hold Town Hall meetings, and generally listen to community members' perspectives on important topics related to the School-to-Prison Pipeline
- Utilize experts in the field of the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and the underlying theories described in the literature review to lead training or inform and educate the leaders
- Develop restorative skills in those who interact with students
- Eliminate punitive habits that present themselves in the actions of adults
- Increase engaging instruction, to help foster
- Plan and implement staff bonding that helps provide training and space for staff community development and reinforcement of other positive school culture practices listed here
- Develop empathy for students
- Listen to students, and hear their perspectives and lived experiences

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

Every school district has its' unique qualities, and replicating this study in near exactness would be worthwhile. In any community, regardless of demographics, it would be valuable to gather evidence of what school leaders perceive to have had an impact on student discipline outcomes. Additionally, beyond the limited scope of this research focused through the lens of a one-time interview of school leaders identified through publicly available data, there are other methods by which a researcher could look for evidence of reducing the School-to-Prison Pipeline and increasing Black student engagement in schools. In addition to interviews, observational notes shadowing school staff, interviews with other stakeholders, board reports, and recorded meetings all serve as other forms of evidence of what is happening in any local context that may

reveal evidence of what is perceived to have improved student discipline outcomes. Future research on the transfer of culturally responsive practices to other contextual studies and in real-life scenarios can lead to new and different strategies to implement during the coming iterations of this study to meet the needs of learners, as the critical tools for developing culturally inclusive environments is invaluable and essential to creating equitable outcomes across all topics and criteria.

Through the lens of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, it should be noted that the theoretical framework itself was only developed in 2016, emerging from culturally relevant and culturally responsive educational theories as described in chapter 2 (Khalifa et al., 2016). As such, the framework should be applied to other situations that extend beyond decisions made by school leaders. One important way to do this would be through the application of this framework to other stakeholder groups. Consider how school staff, students, and families all interrelate through this method. Looking for evidence of how suspensions were reduced by interviewing these stakeholders or observing their responses to interventions would likely reveal evidence of leadership from another angle. Additionally, seeing examples of how a leader is managing their community highlights another side of the concept.

Though this research did not foray deep into the other avenues of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, being the vital role of community leaders centered in the culture of schooling or that of explicitly creating inclusive spaces for students, this is very near and related to the research in this study and should be expanded upon. The role of the community is a whole level above and beyond this, as what goes on from the day-to-day operations of schooling more or less may or may not involve community members. Still, the role of creating inclusive spaces were evident throughout this paper. Though it may feel highlighted, it was not the central focus of the

research questions. Thus, additional research that centers on the role of the spaces created by inclusive action-oriented school leaders striving to shift a school culture is another plane to be developed.

Within leadership, the interventions, strategies, training, and other various resources used have been developed extensively in the literature review of this research and can be investigated further moving forward for valuable reasons. Times change, how school is implemented evolves, and coming out of a pandemic globally we are in an unprecedented time where many of the strategies teachers have used for decades are still at the fingertips while emotional and academic needs have evolved and exacerbated. Thus, more research in this field would be advisable to ensure that investigations are being made into what is now having an impact on students post-pandemic, post-racial uprising of 2020, and most other global phenomena of the most recent zeitgeist.

Lastly, as stated in different forms above, research in any different setting will vary. Every researcher, site, and participant varies, and even within the same sites, the setting changes. So, considering the themes that appear if similar or varied studies are enacted elsewhere, specifics will always differ. This is valuable in both supplementing and supplanting the research, and also in highlighting ways in which research needs to be localized and contextualized and how this is essential to truly tailor the work to the students most directly impacted. One size does not fit all, and any reader of research looking to make an impact must decide for themselves, as leaders do.

### **Conclusion**

The School-to-Prison Pipeline is a concept that has proven through extensive research that its' presence and pervasiveness across American society has contributed to many of the

harms of society. The illicit behaviors in which youth and adults alike are incarcerated start at some point, and the clear concept of the pipeline begins at some point in an individual's life. It's impossible to untangle the role of schooling from that of society outside of the four walls of the institution. Thus, the role of the school is central to the type of person that emerges upon graduation, dropout, or another form of leaving the school formally.

There are many ways to research, reflect upon, and ultimately act to disrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Continuing to inspect how school leaders, staff, students, and families connected to schools can help support the development of a restorative, inclusive, and culturally responsive school community is critical in building the type of school culture that is linked to positive student outcomes. Additionally, teachers of school leaders, through preparation programs and ongoing professional development, play a role in how the growth and evolution of a school leader's abilities may either improve or detract from a school culture.

The responsibility to do this work lies on the shoulders of many. Principals, though the primary research participants in this study, cannot do the work alone. The very nature of staff in any work setting is that there is a collective efficacy that emerges from the entirety of actions and interactions amongst all individuals. These intersections cause results in all forms. The role of the principal is a formal one and though it is somewhat defined in responsibility, still it is but one of many who can influence the future lives of students through the structure of implementing policy and procedures.

Students deserve leaders and adults of all forms surrounding them who embrace them for their inherent qualities, both beneficial and flawed. The role of being a school practitioner necessitates that we do good work to benefit students, and how this is defined may vary but still shall fall within the guidelines of laws, policies, rules, expectations, and expected outcomes or



goals. Within this framework, the work happens. Concerning the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Culturally Relevant School Leadership as well as explicit discipline practices that reduce the number of Black students, there is an obligation to do better, as the inherent problem is pervasive and ever-present.

This study should prove valuable to anyone working to further the mission of improving the lives of students. Whether the targeted mission is to reduce student suspensions, address racial inequities in other forms, or in other ways learn more about the on goings of schools where school cultures have improved, this paper shall add to the body of research in which time and time again, researchers have provided evidence of powerful actions that benefit students. Participants in this study shared exemplary recollections, being specific examples of scenarios in which students were able to thrive under proper conditions as well as old habits and punitive actions left behind. These stories served as a base for research in which the reader can now take themes, findings, and summaries to help further a mission of student academic, emotional, and behavioral improvement. Our students will truly benefit from this work, as will anyone engaging with this research.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT - CONFIDENTIAL

*Study: Shared Reflection on the Perceived Effect of Culturally Relevant School Leadership on Student Suspension Data in K-8th Grade Chicago Public Schools*

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Christopher Graves, Doctoral Candidate and Principal Investigator, and Dr. Lenford Sutton in the Educational Administration and Foundations Department at Illinois State University. The purpose of this study is to determine which leadership practices were present in schools where the number of Black student suspensions were reduced over time.

### **Why are you being asked?**

You have been asked to participate because publicly available data revealed that your school showed at least a 20% reduction in Black student suspensions from fall of 2016 to spring of 2019. You are ineligible to participate if you were not the principal or assistant principal during that entire time period.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

### **What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will participate in a one-time interview. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately 60-90 minutes. You will be asked questions about decisions you made and strategies you attempted from 2016 to 2019, along with questions about your school culture. We will host the interview either at your school or at a nearby location of your choosing. The interview will be recorded.

### **Are any risks expected?**

In the event of a breach of confidentiality there could be a risk to your reputation and with the relationship with your staff. To reduce these risks, I plan to keep all identifiable data on a computer that is not connected to the internet, so that it cannot be found nor obtained through any means.

### **Will your information be protected?**

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. I will record our interview on a device that is not connected to the internet, and will make sure that it is accessible by me only, by locking it up when I'm done using it. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. The results of this research will be disseminated, after it has been de-identified, to professors and eventually published through ProQuest and through the university.

However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

**Could your responses be used for other research?**

Your information will not be used or distributed for future use, even if identifiers are removed.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

Although you will not directly benefit from your participation, the goal of the research is to add to the body of research on effective methods that reduce the “School-to-Prison Pipeline,” and your contribution will help show evidence of success. Any administrator reading the summary of research may benefit. There are no direct benefits to the study, nor compensation.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Chris Graves, by emailing him at [cagrav1@ilstu.edu](mailto:cagrav1@ilstu.edu) or calling him at (812)325-6571. You can also request this information through the Principal Investigator, Dr. Lenford Sutton, at [lsutto@ilstu.edu](mailto:lsutto@ilstu.edu) or (813)857-5130.

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If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or [IRB@ilstu.edu](mailto:IRB@ilstu.edu).

**Documentation of Consent**

Sign below if you are 18 or older and willing to participate in this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT (INTERVIEW PROTOCOL)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Interview Questions</b></p>
<p>1. Tell me about your personal and professional background: How long have you been principal (or assistant principal) at your school? What other (leadership) roles have you served in prior to becoming a principal? Are there other schools you have served in? What were the student demographics of the schools you've worked in? How do you describe your leadership? Would you say that your leadership has evolved over time? If so, in what ways, and what steps did you take to develop your leadership (ex. Which programs, activities, and situations led to change)?</p>
<p>2. How would you summarize the status of the school culture in the fall of 2016?</p>
<p>3. How would you summarize or describe the status of the school culture in the spring of 2019?</p>
<p>4. How has your school culture changed over the time period of fall 2016 to spring 2019? What are some of the factors that you believe have led to the changes?</p>
<p>5. How would you describe changes in staff mindsets over the time period of fall 2016 to spring 2019?</p>
<p>6. What are some of the leadership strategies that were applied during the period that you believe led to change in student discipline outcomes? What role did teachers and staff play during this period that led to the changes? How did the leadership engage the teachers and staff, specifically as it relates to suspensions or disciplinary issues in general?</p>
<p>7. What professional development opportunities did staff participate in over the time period of fall 2016 to spring 2019? How did these strategies come about? (ex. Professional development? Reading articles/research? Etc.?) Please include details such as how many staff participated, which type of staff participated, and to what extent you saw the result of the training implemented and in what ways.</p>
<p>8. How did relationships between administration and staff evolve over the time period of fall 2016 to spring 2019?</p>
<p>9. Are there any other efforts not yet mentioned that you believe led to a reduction in the number of Black student suspensions?</p>

## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL LETTER

Hello (Insert participant name here),

Thanks for corresponding with me!

Please see the attachment below. I'm reaching out, because Illinois State University and CPS both approved me to do my research in the district. In the attachment, it describes the research I plan to implement. In brief, it involves interviewing principals (like you!) who have effectively led schools where there was a significant reduction in Black student suspensions during the time period of 2016-2019. If you're willing to participate in the 45 minute interview that I'd be asking for to complete this study, I would greatly appreciate it. As stated in the paperwork, your name and your school's name will be kept private.

If you're willing to participate, can you suggest some times that work for you, to talk?

Thanks in advance! I greatly appreciate your consideration!

I'm also asked to have you sign and return the form attached, for my records.

Thank you!