How Do Teachers’ Pedagogy Influence the Ways in Which African American Males Are Disciplined? A Case Study Examining Discipline in a High School Setting

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HOW DO TEACHERS’ PEDAGOGY INFLUENCE THE WAYS IN WHICH AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES ARE DISCIPLINED? A CASE STUDY EXAMINING DISCIPLINE IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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HOW DO TEACHERS’ PEDAGOGY INFLUENCE THE WAYS IN WHICH AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES ARE DISCIPLINED? A CASE STUDY EXAMINING DISCIPLINE IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the pedagogies of high school teachers who have demonstrated success in working with African American male students and to determine which factors influence the way African American male students are disciplined. The rationale behind this research was based on the researcher’s direct observation of the many challenges African American male students encounter while navigating high school. The study was guided by a case study methodology to gather information about the shared experiences of the five teacher participants via interviews. Results showed African American male students experience high success levels when working with teachers who possess a restorative mindset and build relationships with their students. Leaders of high school communities throughout the country can use the participants’ experiences and strategies to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline practices that have created a discipline gap for African American male students. Research recommendations include implementing race-conscious restorative justice and mentoring programs in schools with significant populations of African American male students.
PREFACE

No one told me the teachers’ lounge was a cesspool of negativity. I would go there eagerly to sit and engage in dialogue with my colleagues about education issues. In my mind, there was a wealth of knowledge to be gained while grubbing. The first several weeks were good, with many great memories and a ton of off-topic laughs, but things slowly shifted as the year progressed. Conversations became vent sessions at the expense of some of my favorite students. Deans would strategically tell teachers how to start paper trails to get rid of the “bad” kids.

One incident overshadows all others. For weeks, a White female teacher had complained about one of her African American male students. The student’s dean would join in by telling the teacher how she intended to get rid of the student and to keep the referrals coming. An African American woman coached a White woman on how to get rid of an African American male student. After months of premeditated referrals and one incident in which the student pushed the teacher—he was out. I had observed an African American male student be plotted on like weaker prey. As a result of experiences such as this, I am dedicated to shedding light on the discipline disparity for African American male students. May this body of work evoke a call to action on behalf of Black boys everywhere.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my village, I thank you. To those who cheered me on and reassured me countless times, “you got this!” To Dr. Kim Waller-Echols, who gave me my first opportunity to educate young people and also supported me through this journey. To my colleagues who were patient with me when I went off on my long tangents about the unfair treatment of African American male students. I am sure there were moments when my passion translated into other emotions. To my Uncle Ron, who instilled in me a love and respect for education. Thank you for inviting me to your master’s ceremony. You created a path for me. Aunt Avis, when someone refers to me as a mini-you, I am elated. My first bank account, first job, and the futon in my first apartment were all attributed to you. Thank you for modeling excellence and showing me what it takes to be a strong, successful, confident, and professional woman. Aunt Lisa Lisa, my girl. Being intelligent is one thing, but acting like a lady is another . . . thank you. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Harrington Gibson, thank you for your support. There is no way on earth I could have accomplished this goal without you. Much appreciation! Thank you, Dr. Elizabeth Minor, for responding to my late night emails; even in frantic moments you remained calm, which helped me refocus. Not only does it take a village to raise a child, it also takes one to earn a doctorate. My village, I owe you!
DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to all the little girls growing up on the South Side of Chicago who can see themselves out of their current situation; I am you. To the little girls who are resilient and hopeful, continue to chase your dreams. To my own little girl, who is my number one cheerleader and supporter. Autumn, thank you for encouraging me and often serving as my role model. I am so grateful for you. I hope this achievement reminds you that the world is filled with limitless possibilities; your future is bright. To my father, mother, and bonus mom, thank you for supporting me and believing in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. Daddy, you make me feel like I can conquer the world. To my brother, Roscoe, thank you for the much-needed laughter when I was beyond overwhelmed; I needed it. To my sisters and niece, Monique, Monika, and Maliah, the only thing I’ve ever wanted to do was make you proud. I hope this helps. Last, to my brother, who I cherish in my heart. I love you and miss you. D’onte, your sister earned her doctorate!
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The intended purpose of this study was to explore how high school teachers’ pedagogies affect how they discipline African American male students. In researching this topic, it was crucial to examine the factors that can influence why and how African American male students are disciplined. The negative perception of African American male students held by education professionals and society has led to a widening discipline gap in school districts across the country. Significant research over the last 10 years on African American male students in U.S. schools revealed they are underrepresented in every positive measure of educational success and overrepresented in every negative measure (Brinkley et al., 2018). Discipline is one area in which there is an overrepresentation of African American male students.

The disparity in discipline, which widens the discipline gap, leaves African American male students on the unfavorable end of the spectrum. The overrepresentation of Black, male, and low-income learners on school discipline indices is a discipline discrepancy (Monroe, 2005). Unfortunately, national results indicate Black students, in particular, are more heavily punished for less serious and more arbitrary misconduct such as breaches of dress code, rebellion, and disrespect, whereas White students are disciplined for more objective crimes such as vandalism or truancy (Cook et al., 2018, p. 136). African American female students are not exempt from the discipline issue present within schools across the United States. A significant body of research, however, shows Black male students earn suspensions and office referrals at rates two to three times greater than their White peers (Cook et al., 2018, p. 136).
Educators in Sunnyside School District 200 (a pseudonym) are not exempt from implementing discipline practices that directly affect African American male students at higher rates. Sunnyside District 220 is situated in the south suburbs of a major Midwest city and the high school district serves a range of communities. Despite the varying socioeconomic statuses of individuals within the community, 81.3% of students were classified as low income in 2017. District-wide, there were 2,934 students in Grades 9–12 with a racial breakdown of 88.7% African American, 6.7% Hispanic, and 2.6% Caucasian. Of the overall student population, approximately 1,293 students are African American males.

Based on the literature reviewed, these 1,293 African American male students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline, through the use of discipline referrals, than are other students. Black male students with or without special needs are overwhelmingly referred for disciplinary violations, although behavioral research does not seem to support such disproportionate referrals (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). I have worked with male students from different ethnic groups for 13 years. From inner-city Atlanta to the South side of Peoria, boys are boys. I have observed adolescent males with similar behavioral characteristics (e.g., funny, lazy, sporadic, eager, moody, macho, clumsy, etc.) despite their ethnicity. If all adolescent males share these characteristics, why is there a disparity in discipline? How do teachers view African American boys? What norms have society placed on African American male students that make them nearly three times more likely to be suspended from school than their Caucasian counterparts?

Some teachers are successful in their interactions with African American male students and know how to de-escalate or avoid negative encounters. Gregory and Ripski
(2008) found a significant association between teacher-reported discipline approach and the behavior of African American high school students as reported by both teacher and student (see also Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014), which indicates student race or ethnicity may play a role in teachers’ perceptions of different behavior problems or decisions about how best to handle behavior problems (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010).

With race and ethnicity influencing how behavior infractions are handled, it is important to consider the impact of systematic discrimination on African American male students. It is no secret that school policies govern all students and that structure is needed in all organizations, including schools. However, are the rules and regulations designed with all students in mind? Are policies designed to consider culture? When creating rules, there is a standard. However, some rules can be subjective or have a gray area. It is important to create culturally responsive policies to ensure equity. There should be discussions about culture and how different experiences and perspectives shape how rules are enforced. What is considered acceptable conduct in one society is often unacceptable in another (Quappe & Cantatore, 2005). I believe understanding other cultures will assist with how situations are addressed and how students are disciplined. I am not suggesting we disregard a behavior management system. However, I recommend we consider the approach and consequences administered when dealing with students of color. I have had several conversations with staff about de-escalation strategies. Teachers shared that proximity, tone, affirmation, encouragement, and leadership opportunities are some examples of how to be effective when working with African American male students.
In my experience, extreme measures are more often used to reprimand minority students in comparison to non-minority students. Teachers must remove biases and stereotypes when interacting with African American male students. The key is to make decisions free of personal perception and prejudice. In the absence of punishment or referrals, further problems may be resolved if adults focus on their subconscious actions. Misinterpretations arise mostly because we are unaware of our own laws of conduct and project them onto others (Quappe & Cantatore, 2005). Through this research, my goal was to provide effective strategies to help teachers minimize the need to write referrals.

**Purpose of the Program Evaluation**

The purpose of this study was to examine how high school teachers’ pedagogies influence the way they discipline African American male students. Battle (2017) suggested people’s attitudes and beliefs function as a mechanism for limiting the behavioral options they have at their disposal. I chose to study teachers’ pedagogies in the hopes that results would reflect information or strategies that school leaders can use in closing the discipline gap by reducing exclusionary practices. A significant factor in how African American male students are disciplined is the negative perception of them as early as fourth grade; their purity is ignored, and grace for mistakes is not often extended. Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, and DiTomasso (2014) reported Black American male adolescents are not supplied with the presumption of innocence typically afforded to their White male and female counterparts. Unfortunately, stereotypes and biases proceed African American male students, which puts them at a disadvantage in places such as school. In particular, we need to explore how representations of African American men
and boys in society at large contribute to the ideas of teachers regarding successful
disciplinary methods based on the race and gender of a pupil (Monroe, 2005).

A cultural disconnect is an additional contributing factor to the biases and
stereotypes that shape the way teachers view and discipline African American male
students. Typical adolescent behaviors are labeled as inappropriate, disruptive, or
aggressive, landing Black boys in the dean’s office and beyond. How often have teachers
heard an African American male student plead, “I was just playing.” Male students often
complain, with some justification, that teachers have a tendency to misperceive their
behavior and punish them more severely than they do female students (Simmons-Reed &
Cartledge, 2014) or non-minority male students (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008;
Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the
pedagogies of high school teachers who have experienced success in reducing referrals
for African American male students as well as to explore factors that contribute to the
way these students are disciplined.

Evaluating why the discipline gap exists is essential to closing the gap altogether,
and some teachers have demonstrated success in working with African American male
students; I interviewed five of these wonderful educators who provided insight into their
success. However, some teachers are oblivious that such a problem exists in schools
across the country. These teachers enter the field, subconsciously creating standards and
norms within their classrooms that are based on their experiences. Teachers such as these
lack cultural competence; they do not consider how they project their belief systems onto
students or the barriers they create for students who do not fit inside their “box.”
Teachers who do not understand the link between culture and action in the classroom do
not adopt strategies for culturally sensitive teaching and classroom management that can improve the educational experience of African American students (Gay, 2000). Practices that are not culturally responsible put some groups of students at a greater disadvantage. It is the responsibility of school leaders, developers of teacher preparation programs, and practitioners to address the importance of implementing culturally responsive behavior management programs. Teachers need to be mindful of their own stereotypes, work hard to understand their students, find ways to bring the heritage and culture of students into the classroom, and keep all students up to high academic expectations (Quinton, 2013). My goal is to equip teachers with strategies that will enable them to experience higher rates of success when interacting with African American male students. Additionally, I hope this study will force teachers to reflect on their pedagogy and begin to dissect why African American male students are disciplined more frequently, as well as address the need for culturally competent teachers.

Rationale

I chose this particular topic because of the countless number of African American male students I have witnessed receive harsh consequences for subjective behaviors. In my 13 years as an educator, I have worked with students directly as a classroom teacher, district coordinator, and assistant principal. As an assistant principal, I oversaw discipline policies that forced me to use exclusionary discipline against my will. Nonetheless, assigning consequences was my way of supporting teachers who strongly advocated for punitive consequences.

During my time as an assistant principal, I noticed some teachers wrote a lot of referrals whereas other teachers hardly wrote any. I began to observe the teachers with
low referral counts, paying attention to the way they interacted with students, their classroom management styles, and the level of student engagement in their classrooms. As I reflected on these teachers, I began to see a need to explore their practice. What made these two types of teachers—high-referral teachers and low-referral teachers—different? I could not help but wonder how well high-referral teachers understood their students. In urban communities, many teachers lack the element of cultural sensitivity needed as classroom managers and deliver on pedagogy (Miller, 2011). I believe teachers have a responsibility to engulf themselves in the culture of the students they serve. I think that in doing so, their familiarity with their students will support how they interact with them and how they address behaviors. I centered my research study on teachers who have managed to decrease referrals for African American male students. I wanted to dive deep into their thoughts to discover whether their practice can be translated to other teachers to close the discipline gap.

Additionally, I think it is essential to consider factors that influence the way in which African American males are disciplined. My goal was to investigate the “why” behind the high referral rates and exclusionary consequences administered to African American male students. During the study, I interviewed five teachers who were all recommended by their building administrator because of their success rate when working specifically with African American male students.

Goals

The goal of this study was to identify strategies to help reduce discipline referrals for African American male students and to shed light on factors that may influence the way these students are disciplined. Teachers cannot understand how race, ethnicity, and
culture shape discipline in classroom activities, despite the role of race in student teacher referrals (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). One goal within this study was to consider the “why” behind the inflated referrals for African American male students. Ignoring possible biases, embracing stereotypes, and lacking cultural competence may perpetuate the problem. Information and data gathered from this study can, hopefully, lead to improved district policies with accountability for disciplinary equity. By embracing practices like reality pedagogy, which “focuses on the cultural understandings of students within a particular space, like a science classroom” (Emdin, 2012, p. 286), school leaders can promote teaching and learning that values students as individuals (Quinn, 2017). Sharing my findings can potentially open the eyes of educational stakeholders and force them to reflect on their practice.

Shedding light on the discipline disparity that negatively affects African American male students may improve their overall success in school. A reduction in exclusionary practices by default increases the amount of instructional time African American male students receive, which is a possible mechanism for improving their academic performance. The strong positive association between time involved in academic learning and student achievement is one of the most consistent results in modern education research (Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002). Pearman, Curran, Fisher, and Gardella (2019) found evidence that the association between the Black–White achievement gap and the Black–White discipline gap was attributable, in part, to the tight coupling of achievement and discipline for Black students in particular, who experience higher suspension rates in districts with larger achievement gaps and who experience higher achievement in districts that suspend them less frequently. Therefore, closing the
discipline gap could potentially result in better academic outcomes for African American male students.

**Definition of Terms**

For this research study, important terms were defined as follows:

- Cultural competence – Seeing one’s personal and organizational work as an immersive arrangement in which the teacher enters multiple contexts in a way that is additive to cultures that differ from the teacher’s (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999).
- Culturally responsive practices/teaching – Using the cultural understanding of ethnically diverse students, past experiences, reference frames, and performance styles to make learning interactions more meaningful and productive (Gay, 2000).
- Discipline gap – The overrepresentation of Black, male, and low-income students on indices of school discipline (Monroe, 2005).
- Discipline disparities – A phenomenon in which students are overrepresented or underrepresented by a single data point that plagues schools and several institutions nationally in comparison to their percentage in the population (Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012).
- Exclusionary discipline – Suspensions or expulsions that remove students from the learning environment (Scott, Moses, Finnigan, Trujillo, & Jackson, 2017).
• Explicit biases – The deliberately held convictions that individuals from certain racial or ethnic groups are inferior (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014).

• Implicit biases – “The unconscious beliefs people are unaware they hold but that influence their perceptions, behaviors, and decision making—biases are a powerful explanation for the persistence of many societal inequities, even among individuals with egalitarian intentions” (Staats, 2014, pp. 1-2).

• Office discipline referral – Office discipline referrals (ODRs), primarily issued by teachers, document negative student–student and student–staff interactions, providing an early indicator of discipline occurrences that may ensue if unaddressed (Spaulding et al., 2010).

• Pedagogy – “The academic work the teacher is responsible for covering and the teacher’s willingness to expose and embrace the limitations of his or her own content knowledge” (Emdin, 2012, p. 116).

• Professional development – Community exercises and endeavors by school workforce to decide how to best meet their particular needs (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).


• Restorative justice – A collection of activities used to build a healthy school atmosphere and to resolve student misconduct (Farr, Gandomi, & DeMatthews, 2020).
School-to-prison pipeline – The method of sending students out of the school system and into the juvenile criminal justice system (Scott et al., 2017).

Stereotypes – “Attributes or personal characteristics that are accessed immediately upon being exposed to or thinking about members of different social groups” (Tyler et al., 2016, p. 10).

**Research Questions**

The primary research question for this evaluation was: How do high school teachers who have demonstrated success in decreasing discipline referrals for African American male students describe their pedagogy? The findings within this study can be used to assist leaders of school districts with closing the discipline gap for African American male students. Identifying effective strategies and adult practices that reduce discipline infractions was the primary focus of the study. Additionally, it is important to understand why African American male students are disciplined more harshly and more frequently. An examination of individual teachers’ pedagogy gives greater insight into their belief systems and biases, both explicit and implicit. The secondary questions used to guide this study were:

1. What are the factors that influence the way African American male students are disciplined from the perspective of teachers?

2. How do teachers describe their perceptions of African American male students?

3. What are effective strategies teachers can use to successfully manage African American male students?
Conclusion

I have observed African American male students receive consequences for behaviors that are universal to all students in their age group. There is a need to consider the factors that may be responsible for the high number of referrals issued to African American male students. Chapter 2 of this study includes a review of several bodies of literature that indicate teacher biases, lack of cultural awareness, low engagement, and stereotypes are only a few reasons why Black boys receive more referrals and harsher consequences.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

This chapter contains the results of an exploration of the existing literature surrounding the discipline disparities for African American male students, which provided the basis for the current study into this topic. The chapter is divided into the following sections: biases and stereotypes that shape the way in which African American male students are viewed, discipline and consequences rendered to African American male students in response to perceived behaviors and perceptions, and effective strategies in working with African American male students. Through this in-depth study, I wanted to assist in building teacher capacity in ways that will provide opportunities for Black male students to achieve both in school and in society.

It is important for Black male students to possess the skills necessary to overcome obstacles that may be associated with their ethnicity and gender. As educational professionals, we must be cognizant of practices and policies that contribute to the experiences of Black boys in school. Urban education, along with the signs and symbols associated with the place of school, has traditionally and presently been isolated, uncoordinated, disjointed, meaningless, and detrimental to the lived experiences of African American male youth (J. E. Davis & Jordan, 1994; Murrell, 2002). Many scholars have recorded how instruction, regulations of discipline, pedagogy, and other educational frameworks and practices serve to normalize the expectation of Black male youth incarceration and overall failure (J. E. Davis, 2003; Lipman, 2004; Meiners, 2007).

Black male students are left to figure out how to be successful in a system that some may say was designed for them to fail. It has also been documented how Black
male students must navigate a socially constructed narrative about their inadequacy, failure, aggression, and exclusion (Howard, 2014). Scholars have investigated the many contributing factors that add to the narrative that African American male students must overcome, which are often rooted in racism. More specifically, researchers have investigated the sociopolitical and historical realities of racism (Grant, 2011); overarching deficit-laden views about Black boys (Allen, 2015; McGee & Pearman, 2015); stereotypes about Black males as violent, criminal, and anti-school (Allen, 2017; Givens, Nasir, Ross, & McKinney de Royston, 2016; Noguera, 2008) that contribute to inequitable exclusionary discipline practices (Flynn, Lissy, Alicea, Tazartes, & McKay, 2016); the inability to conceptualize Black boys as children experiencing boyhood (Dumas & Nelson, 2016); and a lack of self-reflection on the part of educators to examine their internal biases, power, and cultural awareness vis-à-vis the sociopolitical conditions and contexts of Black boys (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Naturally, people’s thoughts will have some influences on their actions. Teachers need to think through their philosophies and identify inequities in their practices. A growth mindset that influences pedagogical knowledge is a step toward ensuring all students have a learning environment that is safe and conducive to their success. There is increasing research regarding the use of classroom pedagogies to increase equity, social justice, and achievement (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), but considerably less regarding how leaders create school-wide narratives that acknowledge and include Black male students as achievers. Similarly, when perceived by White, middle-class women as men, Black boys are more likely to be disciplined for undefined crimes such as “disruption,” “defiance,” or “disrespect” (Noguera, 2008). Thus,
instructors’ beliefs in creating space for Black boys to relax in their boyhood are deeply connected to mitigating racialized disciplinary practices within the larger school.

Cultural competence and cultural awareness are two interchangeable terms. The basis of communication is cultural awareness, which requires the ability to step back from ourselves and become conscious of our cultural values, attitudes, and perceptions (Quappe & Cantatore, 2005). Being culturally aware entails individuals being conscious of how they compare their normalcy to others’ standards as well as understanding that their experiences shape how they view the world. Hence, teachers are responsible for respecting their students’ cultures and not holding them to their standards of normal. A lack of cultural awareness opens up opportunities for biases, stereotypes, and conflicts.

What is an appropriate action in one culture may not be considered so in another because when two or more people from diverse cultures try to communicate with each other, problems can arise related to their differing personal and social lives, customs and traditions, worldviews, and so on. (İşişağı, 2010, p. 1)

For example, an African American male student who does not make eye contact when speaking with his teacher may be viewed as disrespectful if that teacher’s cultural norm is to make eye contact in such an instance. In this example, the teacher is casting his or her views of respect onto the student based on the teacher’s values. Cases such as this lead to consequences or ruin student–teacher relationships. My goal was to explore the pedagogies of teachers who have demonstrated success in working with African American male students as well as to determine which factors influence the way these students are disciplined.
Biases and Stereotypes that Shape how African American Male Students are Disciplined

It is not uncommon for individuals to bring their value systems into the workplace along with their biases and stereotypes, which are all shaped by personal experiences. Processes and rules are created to govern students who may not share the same values. If teachers build the rules of the classroom without discussing their prejudices, student groups are left more vulnerable than others. Schools are social frameworks and organizations that have their own cultures, norms, and philosophies at work that endorse some identities, yet silence and marginalize others, in addition to individual perceptions (Howard, 2014). Oftentimes, African American male students are at a disadvantage because of others’ perceptions of them. African American male students face strong prejudices that disadvantage both their race and sex (Brinkley et al., 2018).

Biases not only affect individuals, they can affect entire systems as well. When a system is created by individuals who do not consider all cultures, systemic biases are created that isolate those who are outside of the norm and place them at a disadvantage. Critical race theory originated in the area of law, where theorists argued that the justice system inflicts inequalities on people of color persistently and unjustly (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw, 1988). In an investigation in Guilford County Schools, results featured teacher predispositions and unjust practices that minimized African American male students specifically, for example, emotional order references for rebelliousness and inability to use practices that energized student interest (Brinkley et al., 2018). District leaders focused on the systems that were in place and not the African American male students themselves, which reflected systemic discrimination. Teachers discussed the
structural injustice of racial minorities through workshops to help them understand how much of the experience of African American male students has less to do with their gumption and grit and much to do with policies and factors beyond their control (Brinkley et al., 2018). Teachers understood that culturally insensitive processes and systems can lead to the overrepresentation of African American male students in terms of behavior infractions. “Black over-punishment may also be a result of educators’ tendencies to see the behaviors of Black children differently than they do the same behaviors when they occur among White children” (Moody, 2016, p. 153).

Whether the reason is conscious or subconscious, African American male students are treated differently in school settings. Black male students in schools have traditionally been misinterpreted and mistaken, and are often victims of stereotyping and intolerance. (Noguera, 2008). In one study, researchers considered the impact of race on discipline and questioned whether the lack of diversity in the teaching force contributes to the disparities that exist for African American male students. Are minority students more successful with minority teachers? Research has shown Black and Latino students in schools with higher numbers of Black and Latino teachers are less likely to receive exclusionary discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). There is mounting evidence that same-race teachers are beneficial to minority students on a number of contemporaneous dimensions, such as test scores, attendance, course grades, and beliefs in a variety of educational settings (Holt & Gershenson, 2019). Same-race teachers may have a natural ability to connect with students for a plethora of reasons, as it is not naive to acknowledge that cultural commonalities bond people. Culturally if I understand you, I am less likely to perceive your behavior as negative.
Race-matching could be preventative: students could have a better rapport with same-race teachers and be less likely to act up in their class in the first place, or, regardless of student behavior, teachers might be more inclined to be lenient to students of the same race. (Lindsay & Hart, 2017, p. 74)

Relying on race-matching is not the solution to eliminate the discipline gap, but it does highlight the potential benefits of hiring diverse staff.

Lindsay and Hart (2017) provided data that showed race-matching has some impact on discipline and identified various reasons why this might be true. When working with African American male students, educators must recognize these students as unique and keep in mind that difference is not deficient; they simply must acknowledge that African American male students’ self-image affects their interactions in school. African American male students struggle with finding a place in the classroom because they are constantly worried about who they should be in a school setting (Emdin, 2012). Same-race teachers may have encountered similar experiences and understand the need to support students socially and emotionally. However, teachers of different race may be viewed as racist if they suggest Black boys are different and require an alternative approach to ensure their success. “Part of our collective failure to meet the needs of Black males is a fear of acknowledging that they are always being compared to a White middle-class norm from which they often differ” (Emdin, 2012, p. 14). To change the perception of African American male students, educators need a safe space where they can share their concerns without fear of judgment. Once disparities are fully understood, educators may empower themselves with strategies to motivate Black male learners to become more interested and successful learners (Emdin, 2012).
Addressing stereotypes and personal biases is an important part of truly identifying legitimate differences in African American male students. It is fair to say that these students are different, but it is more important to understand why and how. The image of African American men in society is not positive. Stigmas and preconceived notions lay the foundation of who they are in all facets of life, including education. Black men’s often unavoidable public image does not include a desire or ability to succeed academically (Emdin, 2012). The harsh reality is that Black boys are viewed as dumb and treated accordingly. They enter the school system with this narrative weighing heavy on their shoulders. Not feeling acceptance leads Black boys to their own demise in the classroom by exhibiting rude and disruptive behaviors that contradict the positive behaviors observed when they are in settings that allow them to be themselves. In uncomfortable environments, Black boys behave as anticipated. They are actively trying to find themselves and to make variations of themselves based on the perceptions of those inside these spaces (Emdin, 2012).

It is important to consider the effects of stereotypes and biases on African American male students. In one study of Black and White students’ perceptions of teacher treatment, results showed White and Black students with similar achievement levels did not display a significant difference as it related to perceived differential teacher treatment. Examination of the data by sex, however, showed Black male and Black female students experienced teacher care differently when the category was subdivided by sex than their White counterparts did (Marcus, Gross, & Seefeldt, 1991). According to the results, Black male students had the most negative perception of differentiated treatment of the four sub-groups. By and large, the Black male students perceived their
teachers anticipated less from them, approached them less, and gave them fewer decisions than was the situation with the White male and the Black female students (Marcus et al., 1991). It can be inferred that the disparity in treatment was a product of unfair perceptions of teachers based on student ethnicity (Marcus et al., 1991). The results showed the greatest differences were between Black male and Black female students. Marcus et al. (1991) stated the data made it difficult to attribute the teachers’ behaviors to racial discrimination or cultural insensitivity.

Closing the discipline gap requires a revision of policies and systemic practices. Monroe (2005) provided four recommendations to address disproportionality in middle school:

1. provide opportunities for teachers to interrogate their beliefs about African American students,
2. incorporate and value culturally responsive disciplinary strategies,
3. broaden the discourse around school disciplinary decisions,
4. maintain learners’ interest through engaging instruction.  

(p. 48)

Through workshops, teachers can observe practices that work as well as develop approaches that combat their negative beliefs about African American male students. Creating opportunities for teachers to discuss their stereotypes in the absence of ridicule and judgment empowers cultural competence. It is through this level of awareness that the above recommendations can be implemented. An exploration of effective strategies must be considered by all stakeholders. It will take theorists, researchers, and clinicians familiarizing themselves with culturally relevant behavioral norms and integrating culturally familiar behavior management techniques into their practice to eliminate the discipline gap (Monroe, 2005). Providing professional development (PD) is an essential
component of educating, preparing, and equipping teachers with the skills they need to intentionally address the discipline gap. Additionally, including stakeholders on committees tasked with making disciplinary decisions is a strategy school leaders can consider to ensure systemic discrimination is addressed. Monroe (2005) suggested advisory boards may serve as a means for monitoring demographic trends in referrals, highlighting discriminatory patterns that emerge, and identifying problems early in the school year to prevent recurring problems across the year.

There is a correlation between academic success and behavior. In their meta-analysis, Maguin and Loeber (1996) found that poor academic performance appears to be related to frequency, persistence, and seriousness of delinquent activity. There is proof around the nation that students who are overwhelmingly targeted for disciplinary action are the same pupils who perform badly on other achievement indicators (Monroe, 2005). Students who are off task are more susceptible to partaking in mischievous or disruptive behaviors. Teachers who design lessons with students’ interests and abilities in mind are on the right track to closing the discipline gap.

**Discipline and Consequences Rendered to African American Male Students**

The negative perception of African American male students significantly affects how and why they are disciplined. “Considerable research on African American male students in U.S. schools over the past 10 years has shown they are underrepresented in every positive measure of educational outcomes and overrepresented in every negative measure” (Brinkley et al., 2018, p. 1). As early as kindergarten, inequitable differences can be seen in how African American male students are disciplined in comparison to other demographics of students, which is a sad truth. The data showed African American
male students were expelled at higher rates (Bryan et al., 2012). There is an alarming body of research that highlights the discipline disparity that exists in schools across the country. However, it is not necessarily the idea of African American male students being disciplined, but the frequency and types of consequences administered that necessitate a deeper investigation into this topic. Many years of exploration have shown African American male students are at a fundamentally higher danger for openness to exclusionary school discipline practices, including ODRs and suspensions (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Unfortunately, Black boys receive harsher consequences and are recipients of exclusionary discipline at a greater rate than their peers. Exclusionary discipline causes African American male students to miss instructional time as a result of in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion. Loss of instructional time can directly affect academic achievement. Scholars have then linked these differential rates of discipline to achievement disparities by pointing to evidence of the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline on achievement-related outcomes, including missing out on instructional time (Arcia, 2007).

The discipline disparity not only disrupts the educational system, it has been linked to concerns regarding African American male students’ encounters with law enforcement outside of school. “These disparities have led to widespread concern about a potential school-to-prison pipeline in which detentions, suspensions, and expulsions ultimately lead to the overrepresentation of people of color in the nation’s prisons” (Lindsay & Hart, 2017, p. 72). The school experiences of African American male students put them at a higher risk of coming in contact with the justice system. The idea behind the definition of the school-to-prison pipeline is that Black and Latino students
face tougher school punishment than their White peers, and these school-based experiences increase their probability of their future involvement in the criminal justice system (Lindsay & Hines, 2017).

Monroe (2005) reviewed compiled research to investigate the causes of disproportionality in school discipline and make recommendations for change. In her synopsis of the research findings, Monroe examined three conditions that contribute to discipline disparities: (a) the criminalization of Black males, (b) race and class privilege, and (c) zero tolerance policies. Stereotypes are formulated by the images portrayed through various outlets and personalized experiences. Both media and scholarly portrayals of contemporary Black life often highlight cultures of violence, drugs, antiauthoritarianism, and other social deficiencies (p. 46).

Preconceived notions of African American male students precede them even in the classroom. They are vulnerable and left to adhere to policies that were not created with them in mind. Unconscious acts of watching combined with the socialized interpretation of risk result in racial disciplinary action in the classroom (Skiba et al., 2011). It is evident that teachers discipline African American male students more frequently. Additionally, these students are more likely to be disciplined for subjective behaviors in comparison to their White peers. Other research has shown White students are more often issued ODRs for relatively objective problem behaviors that are easily classified (e.g., smoking, vandalism), whereas African American students are more often issued ODRs for more ambiguous or subjective problem behaviors (e.g., disruption) that require a judgment call regarding whether to refer the student (McIntosh et al., 2014).
If African American male students’ behaviors are not aligned with the normalized expectations thrust upon them by adults who are not culturally competent, these students are in jeopardy of receiving discipline referrals more frequently. For example, in a study examining teacher perceptions of students’ academic achievement and motivation, teachers rated students who exhibited classroom behavior that was consistent with mainstream, European American, middle-class norms (i.e., independence and competition) as having higher levels of achievement and motivation compared with students who exhibited Afrocultural behaviors and learning orientations such as communalism and verve (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006).

Unfortunately, preconceived images of Black boys influence how they are treated in and outside of school. In response to unwanted behaviors, teachers react more harshly to Black students. Are teachers knowingly treating Black students differently or is it a result of unconscious biases that are shaped by their experiences? Many teachers may not explicitly connect their disciplinary reactions to negative perceptions of Black male students, yet systematic trends in disproportionality indicate teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to non-punitive measures (Monroe, 2005). Teachers approach African American students with an emphasis on controlling their behaviors (Baker, 2017). Two years ago at an awards ceremony for college seniors who ranked the highest in their class, I heard a young woman who was just completing her student teaching announce in her speech, “I am working in a diverse classroom and I have learned that those students [African American males] need more structure and discipline.” There is a stigma that minority students require rigid structures to be
successful, which is not factual. All children need and deserve a nurturing environment, a connection with adults, and an atmosphere of acceptance even as we are teaching and practicing skills (Baker, 2017).

Monroe’s (2005) synopsis of research findings revealed the systemic policies that indirectly discriminate against African Americans. Monroe mentioned how the practices and policies within educational systems are created by individuals with a different value system. Individuals who create the rules do not mirror those who will be governed by the rules. Lack of cultural sensitivity can lead to biased consequences for behaviors that are not intended to be unruly. Examples include viewing overlapping speech as disrespect, play fighting as authentic aggression, and ritualized humor as valid insults (Monroe, 2005). A disconnect in expectations between teachers and students widens the discipline gap and causes significant issues for African American male students. Teachers have the power to make disciplinary practices that can clearly harm these students without any serious ramifications (Milner, 2013). We need to acknowledge how stereotypes shape the practices used in classrooms and begin to hold teachers accountable for their actions.

Social constructs dictate how people are treated. The false narrative of African American male students leaves them in danger of being victims of unfair discipline practices. What is not often discussed is that there is a fear of African American men and boys in various settings, including school. This fear leads to impulsive reactions to behaviors that are subjective. Teachers are more likely to encourage exclusionary practices when it comes to disciplining African American male students. Teachers and administrators may indeed be afraid of their African American and Latino American
students and consequently be less willing to work with them in order to keep them in the classroom and teach them (Milner, 2013).

Failure to identify race-conscious behavioral management plans leads to zero tolerance programs, which put minority students at a disadvantage. Institutional policies on the district and school level (e.g., zero tolerance) can be rife with racism, especially when they are constructed by and follow a White norm that excludes the behavioral and interactional styles and practices of non-White people (Milner, 2013). “Rule with an iron fist” should not be the discipline philosophy used when working with children. However, zero tolerance initiatives are supported by school leaders in an effort to eliminate the “riff raff.” On the receiving end of the policy are immature boys and girls who are one bad decision away from being criminalized. Zero tolerance policies present greater concerns than curtailing bad behaviors; they eliminate the opportunity for all stakeholders to weigh in on appropriate consequences as well as heighten the number of racial discrepancies.

What appears to be a more significant challenge, however, is working cooperatively with parents and communities to construct schools where disruption is minimized overall (Monroe, 2005). Zero tolerance policies strip educators of opportunities to collaborate with stakeholders or implement restorative practices. We need to explore more programs like the progressive discipline initiative if we want to eradicate the discipline disparity that exists for African American male students. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2012) defines progressive discipline as:

A whole-school approach that utilizes a continuum of prevention programs, interventions, supports, and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and to build upon strategies that promote and foster positive
behaviours. When inappropriate behaviour occurs, disciplinary measures should be applied within a framework that shifts the focus from one that is solely punitive to one that is both corrective and supportive. Schools should utilize a range of interventions, supports, and consequences that are developmentally and socio-emotionally appropriate and include learning opportunities for reinforcing positive behavior while helping students to make better choices. (p. 4)

It is through this type of initiative that we can begin to close the discipline gap. Educators across the county need to review best practices and be intentional about implementing strategies that have shown success in communities with high numbers of African American male students.

**Effective Strategies in Working with African American Male Students**

Leaders of Guilford County Schools realized their African American male students were the recipients of subjective discipline referrals that were a result of inequitable practices (Brinkley et al., 2018). As a result, teachers attended a 2-day anti-racism training in which they were encouraged to explore systemic biases toward racial minorities. Additionally, district leaders addressed student disengagement by exploring strategies to improve early literacy through the use of visual aids, hands-on learning, opportunities for mental breaks, and culturally relevant texts. The early literacy initiative was implemented to find causes and solutions for disengagement. Aside from focusing on literacy, teachers attended extracurricular events that strengthened their relationships with students and their families. Leaders of Guilford County Schools focused on fixing systems and not students. They understood the importance of the foundational work that needed to be done to change the narrative of African American male students. In
Guilford County, the district leaders aimed to change adults’ beliefs and practices rather than to “fix” boys of color by improving relationships between teachers and students and addressing implicit bias among educators in two areas: early literacy and discipline policies (Brinkley et al., 2018).

The discipline initiative was piloted in three middle schools and extended to five high schools. The initiative was intended to challenge beliefs and improve school climate. Eric Hines led the discipline initiative and provided coaching sessions to teachers who struggled with classroom management. During these coaching sessions, teachers and administrators realized classroom infractions were heavily affecting instructional time. Hines focused on addressing teachers’ and administrators’ mindsets and belief systems, building leadership relaxed policies, and challenging teachers to find a different approach when students were out of compliance. Teachers revised their classroom climate and created a more welcoming environment. Teachers no longer judged unfamiliar behaviors and were mindful of respecting Black male students’ personal space (Brinkley et al., 2018). Guilford County Schools experienced a decline in discretionary referrals among African American male students as well as improved relationships between them and their teachers.

It is no secret that relationships are important to the work educators do; when we begin to think about closing the discipline gap, relationships are a great place to start. Considering the importance of relationships, leaders of one school district decided to explore the impact of race on discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). There is consistent evidence to show African American male students are less likely to receive exclusionary discipline if taught by a Black teacher. Race-matching is one example of a way to close
the discipline disparity based on the study. Cultivating a teaching workforce that is reflective of an increasingly diverse student body reflects inclusive national values and may serve as a critical tool to narrow the racial gap in discipline outcomes (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Further research is required to explain why Black teachers have fewer discipline issues with Black boys. Speculations are that Black teachers may be more lenient on same-race students or Black teachers may have better classroom management strategies. Either way, a reduction in exclusionary discipline was noted. The effect of teacher–student race match represents a 12% decrease in the number of students experiencing exclusionary discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Research supports that race-matching is more profound for Black boys. The rate of exclusionary discipline for Black male students is reduced by 2 to 3 percentage points when they are matched to a Black teacher rather than a White teacher (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

All teachers can experience success with African American male students by understanding their style and the types of interactions they prefer.

To address the low achievement of Black male students, school leaders and educators must be willing to accept that there are ways of looking at the world, modes of communication, and approaches to teaching and learning that are unique to Black male students. (Emdin, 2012, p. 13)

Considering the connection between academics and behavior highlights the importance of closing the achievement gap and exploring how that will, in turn, close the discipline gap.

To effectively address the achievement gap or the discipline gap, an examination of best practices as it relates to educating Black boys must be considered. Emdin (2012) presented five tools to engage Black boys: cogenerative dialogues, co-teaching,
cosmopolitanism, context, and content. Congenerative dialogues provide a platform for Black male students to discuss how their teachers can better support them. Co-teaching is an opportunity for Black male students to teach the class. Cosmopolitanism builds community and respect for the classroom structure, procedures, the teacher, and each other. Context connects students’ lives to the classroom through real-life artifacts. Content gives Black boys a platform to challenge inconsistencies in information presented by the teacher. These five tools are used in response to the different needs of Black boys. “Given the persistence of achievement gaps, educators must be willing to move beyond political correctness and stop paying lip service to meeting the needs of Black male students without changing their own practices” (Emdin, 2012, p. 16).

Culturally responsive practices are also used to address the current disparities affecting African American male students. Culturally sensitive pedagogy, as an analytical instrument, allows teachers to think carefully and consciously about what they teach and why they teach it in a sociopolitical context (Milner, 2016). Culturally competent teachers understand the importance of implementing strategies that consider their students’ experiences. Culturally responsive pedagogy stresses that teachers study their students (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and use students’ experiences as cultural data sets (Lee, 2007) to maximize students’ opportunities to learn (Milner, 2016). To move the academic needle and close the discipline gap, leaders of school districts need to provide intense PD in both cultural competency and culturally responsive teaching. The two are buzzwords that need to become practical practices implemented in schools across the country. Although cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching practices have been the focus of numerous studies in the past few decades (e.g., Gay, 2002; Villegas &
Lucas, 2002; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995), most teachers still lack the readiness and training necessary to create culturally inclusive classrooms (Keengwe, 2010; Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Skepple, 2014). Educators need to examine the beliefs they bring into the school and how these beliefs shape the way African American male students are educated and disciplined. What policies and systemic protocols are created based on personal beliefs?

Conclusion

This review of literature contained a focus on the discipline disparity for African American male students, stereotypes and biases that affect how African American male students are disciplined, and effective strategies used to close the discipline gap. The literature review outlined the need for and importance of continuous PD in not only schools, but in settings where systemic racism can marginalize African American boys and men. There is a societal need to increase cultural awareness to eliminate the blatant discrimination that affects African American boys both in and outside of school.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter contains an overview of the qualitative research design and phenomenological approach used to conduct the current study. It includes a discussion of the specific research methods used in this study.

Research Design Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers’ pedagogies influence the way in which African American male students are disciplined and to explore contributing factors that influence why they are disciplined differently. This is critical to investigate so we can understand best practices when engaging with African American male students and perhaps come to recognize strategies that will close the discipline gap. In this unveiling, it is also possible to begin discussing systemic racism and finding ways to equip educators with the skills they need to become culturally competent. The research was driven by a phenomenological case study approach, as the goal was to better understand the experiences of participants interacting with African American male students (Mourlam, De Jong, Nicholas, & Baron, 2019). Though both phenomenology and case study are unique methodologies in their own right, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained other methodologies can be combined with case studies to help focus the inquiry as it occurs within the bounded system and are common throughout the literature (p. 403; see also e.g., Fine, 2015; Goodman, 2016; Nielsen, 2006).

Once I gathered all of the qualitative data necessary for the study, I was able to draw research-based conclusions. Research promotes the use of different evaluation approaches because qualitative strategies can be helpful in describing what happens in a
classroom or program, how a program is implemented, and in deepening our understanding of what outcomes mean (Patton, 2008).

For this phenomenological case study, the method of data collection included 50-minute semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured life-world interview is used to understand themes of the everyday living world from the viewpoint of the subjects themselves (Kvale, 2007). Phenomenological analysis and interpretation of the case were designed to extract the most important themes. Themes were threaded together to provide an impression of the teachers’ experiences working African American male students. The methods and findings discussed in the literature review both confirmed and provided justification for using qualitative methodologies for my study regarding the treatment of African American male students as it relates to discipline infractions and the underlying issues that contribute to the discipline disparity. Qualitative inquiry is purposeful samples of information-rich cases (Patton, 2008). Information-rich cases can provide a significant amount of information about a topic; that is why it is called purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002).

Participants

Sunnyside District 220 is situated in the south suburbs of a major Midwest city and the high school district serves a range of communities. Despite the varying socioeconomic statuses of individuals within the community, 81.3% of students were classified as low income. In 2017, district-wide, there were 2,934 students in Grades 9–12 with a racial breakdown of 88.7% African American, 6.7% Hispanic, and 2.6% Caucasian. Of the overall student population, approximately 1,293 students are African American males. There are 211 teachers across the district with a racial breakdown of
60.1% White, 34.7% Black, 2.3% Hispanic, .9% Asian, and .5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Because I was unfamiliar with the staff, I requested the assistant superintendent identify five to 10 high school teachers across the district who demonstrated success in decreasing ODRs for African American male students and who had observable positive interactions with African American male students. A total of five individuals were selected and agreed to participate in the study. Because of the fact that qualitative research is done in an in-depth manner, the sample cannot be too large (Pollach, 2011).

After a potential participant expressed interest in participating in the study, I contacted him or her via email to schedule an interview. Each participant received a consent form before the interviews (see Appendix A). The protection, integrity and self-worth of respondents, program participants, customers, and other stakeholders with whom they associate are valued by evaluators (Patton, 2008).

**Data Gathering Techniques**

I used semi-structured interviews to gather information to address the questions of this research study. The primary question was: How do high school teachers who have demonstrated success in decreasing discipline referrals for African American male students describe their pedagogy? The secondary questions were: What are the factors that influence the way African American male students are disciplined from the perspectives of teachers? How do teachers describe their perceptions of African American male students? What are effective strategies teachers can use to successfully manage African American male students? I created an interview protocol to ensure
equity among the participants and myself (see Appendix B) and used a set of interview questions to navigate through the process (see Appendix C).

In addition to the techniques mentioned above, I relied on secondary data to help address both the primary and secondary research questions. Secondary data are data initially obtained for a different purpose and reused for another research query (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Through field experience, I have observed interactions between staff and African American male students. I have encountered teachers with positive relationships as well as teachers with a history of behaviors that lead to heightened discipline infractions for African American male students. While serving as an assistant principal, I was responsible for discipline. In this role, I reviewed countless referrals and attended discipline hearings that resulted in more African American male students being expelled than any other demographic. Such field experience provided data to support the primary research I conducted. Data collected earlier by other researchers or for reasons other than science, such as official reports, administrative records, or other accounts regularly maintained by organizations, may be used for certain social research questions (Hox & Boeije, 2005). The use of secondary data supported the primary research conducted in this study. The approach to secondary data analysis is to apply analytical expertise and conceptual skills to tackle the research question using existing data (Johnston, 2014).

**Interviews.** Both the primary and secondary questions were addressed through teacher interviews. The interview setting allowed the participants to share their experiences with me and allowed me the opportunity to look for themes that emerged. Qualitative interviewing is certainly a versatile and effective method for documenting the voices of participants and how they make sense of their experiences (Rabionet, 2011). I
conducted five 50-minute semi-structured interviews and recorded them through an application called Otter. To ensure all participants were exposed to the same questions and given equitable opportunities to share their experiences, I established an interview protocol.

**Secondary data.** Referrals, administrative records, and hearing documentation served as support data in this study. Collection and reviewing of such data is a part of my daily practice. Large-scale surveys or data obtained as part of personal research can be secondary data (Tripathy, 2013). Such data provided evidence to support the need to identify strategies to close the discipline gap.

**Field observations.** In my day-to-day operations as an administrator, I am required to complete weekly observations that serve as snapshots of both instruction and classroom management. Through these observations, I collect data that are later used to determine PD opportunities for staff. The data collected are usually based on human beings and their experiences in a particular socio-cultural sense with field observations (Smiley, 2015). Additionally, field observations are a platform to focus on interactions between students and teachers. It is through these encounters that I have observed both effective and ineffective strategies used to manage African American male students.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

**Interviews.** Once I transcribed the interviews, I replayed the audio recordings multiple times to ensure the information was properly transcribed. I then analyzed the data using horizontalization, which is defined as the act of evaluating every statement in the interview transcript equally (Rafique & Hunt, 2015). After the analysis, I was able to develop a structured outline of the participants’ responses and themes that were found.
As historical interview studies have shown, the interview is an effective tool of creating awareness of the human condition that has changed the ways of understanding the human situation and controlling human actions in the 20th century (Kvale, 2007).

**Secondary data.** I used secondary data to substantiate the need for an intentional focus on the discipline disparity that exists for African American male students. I read literature that brought awareness to the disproportionate data sets that consistently show African American male students in unfavorable situations. However, being privy to actual data created a sense of urgency because of the personal connections generated.

**Field observations.** Through field observations, I was able to align the themes identified from the interviews with actual behaviors displayed by both teachers and students. These observations served as evidence to validate proposed strategies that allow for the successful management of African American male students and added a practical layer to the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

I ensured this research project was conducted ethically. First, I reached out to district administration to outline the purpose of the study. The assistant superintendent assisted me by providing a list of teachers who met the criteria I discussed when seeking out participants. Second, all prospective participants received an overview of the study prior to receiving a Google Form where they had an option to opt in or out of the study. Based on the responses, I provided consent forms to all participants (see Appendix A). All participants willingly shared their experiences in the interviews. Interviews were conducted separately and responses were not shared. Through the interviews, teachers candidly shared their experiences with both managing and educating African American
male students. There were similar strategies, encounters, and attitudes among the participants. These themes are outlined in greater detail in the findings section of this study.

Limitations

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. Limitations are matters and occurrences that arise in a study that are out of the researcher’s control. Despite my attempts to eliminate such concerns, it was impossible to conduct a study in the absence of limitations. Every research has limitations, no matter how well it is performed and built (Simon & Goes, 2013). Areas that presented concerns in my study were the sample size, the ethnicity of participants, depth of responses, and demographics of the student body.

I originally set a goal of 10–12 participants. To encourage participation, I offered $25 gift cards to all participants who completed the interview process. After several attempts to secure participants, six committed to the study, although one dropped out right before the interviews, leaving a relatively small sample size. A sample size that is too small can potentially reduce the power of the study. The internal and external validity of a study are undermined by very small samples (Faber & Fonseca, 2014).

The lack of diversity among participants was another limitation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020):

In 2017–18, about 79 percent of public school teachers were White, 9 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were Black, 2 percent were Asian, 2 percent were of Two or more races, and 1 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native;
additionally, those who were Pacific Islander made up less than 1 percent of public school teachers. (para. 3)

To legitimize my findings, I wanted a group of participants who mirrored the teacher demographics mentioned above. However, my study included all African American participants, two men and three women. Same-race teachers are known to be more effective with managing African American male students. If a student and teacher share cultural values embedded in their racial or ethnic group, the teacher may give a fairer evaluation of the student’s actions or academic success in the classroom than teachers who lack this shared cultural understanding (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clae, & Curran, 2004). Research has shown African American teachers are more successful with students of the same race as Black teachers usually describe Black students as less likely to disrupt class or externalize problem behaviors compared to when Black students are rated by a teacher of another race (Redding, 2019). Race alone may be a contributor to the responses shared during the interviews, which is a limitation to the overall study.

Themes were successfully identified. However, in some interviews additional probing was required to solicit an in-depth response. The need to ask additional questions can alter the interview and shift the participant’s focus. Researchers do not draw causal inferences from case studies so alternate theories can not be removed (Simon & Goes, 2013). Some responses were aligned to the study whereas others strayed from the intent and limited the opportunity to identify more meaningful themes.

The student body in the district studied was 87.7% African American. With little diversity, some participants expressed that it was difficult to compare the treatment of African American male students to their peers, who were mainly African American girls.
A more obvious difference may have been apparent in a district with a more diverse student population.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations listed above, I collected enough data to inform the study. I collected qualitative data with a phenomenological case study approach to analyze and contribute to my understanding of the overall discipline disparity that exists for African American male students. Ultimately, the findings of this study may not only be useful to leaders and educators in Sunnyside School District 200, but also to other contexts as well. In the next chapter, I present the results from the actual study.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that contribute to the disciplinary disparity that exists for African American male students. The focus of this chapter is on the results of the research study. I completed this qualitative study using a phenomenological case study method to examine the experiences of teachers who have achieved success with working with African American male students. By using this method, I was able to gather information through in-depth interviews and then identify common themes. Additionally, I used field observations and secondary data to support the themes that arose during the interviews. I designed this study to answer the following research question: How do high school teachers who have demonstrated success in decreasing discipline referrals for African American male students describe their pedagogy? This chapter includes an explanation of the data collection, data analysis, participant demographics, participant profiles, emergent themes, a discussion of the results, and finally the chapter conclusion. Upon collecting and analyzing my data, it is now time to share what the results show and begin to uncover how we can close the discipline gap.

While completing my change plan, I questioned how my findings would influence the whole system, Sunnyside School District 200. After reading Change Leadership (Wagner et al., 2006), I realized my data may affect the system in such a way that would require administration to develop a strategic plan to combat the newfound challenges. Addressing one component of a system may create new challenges to resolve the initial
problem. Often, the simplistic linear explanations of cause and effect neglect the fact that today’s effect can, in turn, be the cause of tomorrow (Wagner et al., 2006). Honing in on factors that contribute to the discipline disparity for African American male students is a topic that will force leaders of school districts to examine the problem and discover root causes.

Inequitable discipline practices is an adaptive challenge requiring the use of strategic planning. It is adaptive work that needs improvements in the heads, hearts, and behaviors of people (Wagner et al., 2006). Change affects all parts of a system because of the interrelated relationships. Understanding Wagner et al.’s (2006) 4 Cs tool forces one to think about how various parts affect the whole system strategically. These four components help leaders focus on what needs to happen to achieve goals throughout the systems they lead. The As-Is diagnostic tool helps identify and diagnose some of the factors that influence the problem (Wagner et al., 2006; see Appendix D).

**Contexts.** Wagner et al. (2006) stated context refers to the “larger organizational systems within which we work and their demands and expectations” (p. 104). The first organizational system recognized as having an impact on the context of this research is the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Illinois law requires that the ISBE identify school districts or state authorized charter schools that use exclusionary disciplinary measures more often than other districts. Specifically, Section 2-3.162 of the School Code states:

(b) The State Board of Education shall analyze the data under subsection (a) of this Section on an annual basis and determine the top 20% of school districts for the following metrics:
(1) Total number of out-of-school suspensions divided by the total district enrollment by the last school day in September for the year in which the data was collected, multiplied by 100.

(2) Total number of out-of-school expulsions divided by the total district enrollment by the last school day in September for the year in which the data was collected, multiplied by 100.

(3) Racial disproportionality, defined as the overrepresentation of students of color or White students in comparison to the total number of students of color or white students on October 1st of the school year in which data are collected, with respect to the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, which must be calculated using the same method as the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights uses. (Illinois General Assembly, 2015, para. 3-6)

In 2019, Sunnyside School District 200 was identified as being in the top 20% of the exclusionary discipline metrics. Research throughout my study aligns with metrics identified by the ISBE and substantiates the disparity for African American male students. Black male students make up the largest proportion of students who receive exclusionary discipline (Cook et al., 2018), meaning these students are removed from the classroom as a punishment via detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Exclusionary discipline leads to heightened absences from the classroom and a reduction in the number of opportunities African American male students are given to engage with the content through both student- and teacher-led activities.
**Culture.** In my opinion, shifting the culture of a well-established system is the most challenging component of the 4 Cs model. Culture refers to the intangible yet strong meanings and behaviors maintained in a framework individually and collectively (Wagner et al., 2006). Sunnyside School District 200 has a high number of tenured teachers; the district is union strong and staff are very vocal about change. There is a level of distrust between teachers and administration, which makes the idea of change overwhelming. All stakeholders do not share core values; there is a lot of finger pointing and blame directed toward all stakeholders. Wagner et al. (2006) defined culture as “the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and beyond school” (p. 102). Tenured teachers set the tone and heavily influence the culture, whether negatively or positively; they are the epicenter of the district.

There is a disconnect between teachers and students. Teachers feel students should respect them because of their age or title. Subjective behaviors are deemed disrespectful, which leads to discipline referrals, especially for Black boys. White teachers may be unfamiliar with Black male students’ interaction patterns and thus mistake their attitudes as disrespectful or unacceptable (Townsend, 2000). Instead of seeking clarity and trying to better understand Black boys, I observe teachers sharing stereotypes in a condescending manner. The theme of social mutuality and the ability to learn from one another is important in developing higher levels of cultural competence (Sperry, 2012). The culture in District 200 is that undesirable behaviors warrant severe consequences. Teachers want students out of their classrooms, with no exceptions. I
often hear disgruntled teachers mumble about Public Act 099-0456; they feel as though it limits the type or amount of consequences students can receive.

Wagner et al. (2006) described organizational culture as the “way things get done around here” (p. 108). In other words, though an organizational chart might demonstrate how things “should” get done, culture is the reality—it is the patterns, shared assumptions, and interpretations that shape behavior within an organization.

**Conditions.** The conditions are the more concrete elements that form how we make sense of an organization’s surface-level health relative to culture (Wagner et al., 2006). The external architecture of student learning or the concrete arrangements of time, space, and resources are conditions (Wagner et al., 2006). District 200’s current condition limits opportunities to provide culturally sensitive training. It is crucial to expose staff to data so the conversation can be framed around what is observed; allocating time to do so will be challenging because the focus is on reading and math. To combat the discipline disparity will require central office support and a shift in the district’s overall focus. Examining the conditions will force district leaders to make data-informed decisions and minimize the use of reactive tactics. Sunnyside has a history of using band aids to temporarily fix the problem. Current conditions are not conducive to the long-term goals within the district.

**Competencies.** To address the discipline disparities that exist for African American male students, staff must be knowledgeable in this area. If educators lack the expertise, abilities, and self-efficacy to resist and fix perceived problem behaviors, they are more likely to rely on exclusionary discipline to tackle problem behaviors (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). In my “As-Is” diagram, I noted teachers and administrators are
unfamiliar with culturally sensitive practices. There are no observable behavior or data that lead me to believe leaders in the district are culturally competent or that we have the capacity to lead PDs addressing discipline practices. In their position as disciplinarians, culturally sensitive teachers are confident, less likely to write disciplinary referrals, and have better relationships with students and parents than their peers (Cooper, 2003). In isolation, I have observed the use of de-escalation strategies. However, this is not a consistent practice used by all teachers and administrators across the district. To eliminate the discipline disparities in our district, someone has to initiate the conversations, which requires a level of competency. There is a need for honest dialogue and receptiveness, which are both lacking in our district as well.

**Interpretation**

I aligned the themes that emerged from the interviews with recurring topics identified in the literature. The use of secondary data such as referrals, suspension records, and expulsion packets added a layer of confirmation to the study. Reading literature addressing a particular issue is insightful, but connecting research to practical experiences intensifies the need to propose solutions. Field observations validated both interview responses and the innumerable articles I read. In this section, I interpret the results and articulate the significance of the study as it relates to closing the discipline gap.

**Unfair treatment of African American male students.** Although not often discussed, teachers are aware of the unfair treatment of African American male students. Participant B stated,
I think, in this society we as African American males are seen as a threat. We’re something to be feared and unfortunately I think it translates into the classroom. I mean, you see it in the news, you see it in the media, you see in movies that we are dangerous. We are like a separate entity. What I mean is that you have Black girls, White girls, White boys, but then you have that special classified category and you have to handle them differently. You have to handle them harsher more harshly than everyone else.

Teachers are aware of the disparity but are not given the proper platform to discuss it, so it remains an ongoing issue. There is power in addressing biases as they relate to how African American male students are treated. Participant A stated,

I think that a lot of times the same behavior that Black male child would exhibit. If it had been a different kid of a different demographic in different school would be viewed differently and so I try to be very cognizant of that. With regards to my role as a dean I try to be aware that those biases exist. Whether we like it or not, you know, teachers, bring those biases into the classroom.

Individuals such as Participant A are change agents. He recognizes his personal biases can influence how he disciplines students. Additionally, Participant A recognizes the unjust treatment of African American male students in comparison to students of other demographic groups.

**Changing the narrative of African American male students.** Some teachers attempt to change the narrative of African American male students within their classrooms. Teachers establishing rapport and building relationships with African American male students was a common theme among the participants. All participants
discussed how they want their students to understand that they are not out to get them or hurt them, but to help them make better choices. Participant B stated,

> Any disciplinary measure whether there’s something simple as making them redo an assignment that I know that they cheated on or copied from somewhere, or referring them to the dean’s office for more serious discipline because of something that is disruptive, whatever it is, I make sure that I take that opportunity to build the relationship with that student, so they understand that, hey, this is necessary because of your behavior, but I’m not out to get you. I’m here to help make sure that this doesn’t hurt you. That it won’t be able to hurt you in the future.

These teachers rely on one-on-one conversations and strong relationships to accomplish this and build such a rapport. These teachers pride themselves on being able to resolve conflicts within their classroom; two of the three participants highlighted the fact that they do not tend to write referrals. One participant explained how resolving infractions in-house prevents students from getting suspended for behaviors she views as minor. Participant C stated,

> So with my African American male students, I give some type of suggestions on how to make the situation better. So when it comes down to discipline, I’m known as the teacher that does not write referrals, because I feel like I can handle it on my own, and I’ve never really had a case where it’s gotten as big as it could get.
This same teacher talked about how she gauges her students’ behavior and knows when they are off. Commonalities among the participants are strong relationships, a desire to redirect students and resolve conflicts internally, and little to no referral writing.

**Wanting the best for African American male students.** During the interviews, the participants did not use fancy buzzwords to describe their interactions with students. Their responses were simplistic in nature and demonstrated they simply want what is best for their students. Participant D stated,

I would rather discipline you here in the classroom, versus me sending you out to them, and them saying okay this is automatic 3 days. To me, that makes no sense you’re jeopardizing this child’s learning capabilities because they wouldn’t comply. Well, maybe they needed their phone for something. So I’ve always implemented this in my own classroom. If I ask you a question assume I already know the answer, just tell me you don’t want to talk about it. It works for me especially with Black boys because they don’t necessarily want to talk because it’s too many people, so much stuff going on, but they’ll know that they can pull me to the side and say okay . . . this is what’s going on.

Participants discussed treating their students as members of their family and creating a culture within their classrooms that supports this notion. Two of the five participants were African American men who often spoke from personal experience and discussed hardships they overcame while navigating high school. Participant B stated,

I feel that we as Black men, young Black men are judged harshly. The level of tolerance is a lot lower. But again, that’s how I feel as a person that’s my personal opinion.
It’s kind of hard for me to separate myself as a Black male teacher from being a Black man, I’m doing it 24–7, 100%. I think they would want what I would want is number one to be heard. Number two to think that they do have a fair shot with me. You know, that’s what I would want, not to be treated as okay well you have to talk to them harshly you know stronger because that’s what they respond to. Not every young Black man responds to that, I would not have responded well to that as a teenager.

**Influence of stereotypes on teachers’ pedagogy.** The findings showed teachers’ pedagogy can influence how they respond to student behaviors. Two participants agreed African American male students’ behaviors are viewed differently. One stated that if a student of a different race demonstrated the same behavior it would not be viewed the same. African American male students are treated more harshly and are often feared or seen as a threat. Two separate participants did not have an opinion of African American male students’ behavior because of the positive relationships they have with these students. Participant E stated,

I really don’t have a perception about African American males’ behaviors in the classroom. I’ve always tried to establish a relationship. So, I don’t never really have major problems with my male students, even the ones that have returned from alternative. You know outside places setting. I just always tell them from the very beginning, I’m going to I’m going to ask you to respect me and teaching assistants. And as it gets to a time that we can’t respect each other like that then we need to have a conversation.
Participants in the study view African American male students as sons, younger brothers, nephews, or as one participant stated, “my friend.” When discussing how she redirects student behavior through one-on-one conversations, Participant C stated,

I take them in the hallway, and I’m able to have that mother–son, sister–brother, best female friend type of relationship with them, and they still know that I’m tough, and they know that I’m not going to take their mess. So they have to change their behavior.

Participants were aware of the negative perception of African American male students and shared how colleagues often spoke bad about them. Participant A shared his experiences during the interview. He elaborated on how some teachers strategically use practices to have students removed from their classrooms. Participant A stated,

I know there are some teachers who have a similar mindset. But then I also know that there are some that, first things first, they’re going to write a referral, and they’re going to start a paper trail and if they have a kid that they’ve deemed that is going to be difficult then their objective is to get them out of the classroom. So the referral process will be used as kind of that paper trail to say hey, I tried ABC and now this kid’s gotta go.

Teachers such as those who participated in the study are exceptions. They stand out to colleagues and administrators alike. Their reputation supersedes them and they end up with the “bad” kids on their roster. These rare teachers will play an integral role in closing the discipline gap. Their pedagogy produces practical strategies that are transferable and can help other teachers be more successful with managing African
American male students. Participant C shared her thoughts on disciplining African American male students,

As it relates to behavior issues, I tend to not have too many. Everybody’s allowed to have good days or bad days and on those bad days, I give them their corner I give them their moment. I take them swiftly to the hallway, so we can be a little more personal because. Most of the time, I know that I’m not the issue and if I’m ever the issue I do still take them in the hallway and ask them okay well where did we go wrong. Okay, well how can we change this up.

Authentic and genuine relationship building is a strategy that works well with African American male students. They have to know, believe, and feel their teachers care about them. Also, teachers must be fair. These practical strategies were shared by the participants. Additionally, teachers use proximity, tone, self-regulation, and check-ins to de-escalate explosive behaviors. A consensus is that giving students space and time to regulate their behavior is key.

Judgments

In this section of the study, I provide my judgment and responses to the primary and secondary research questions in this study. Here I show how I used the participants’ responses to answer the research questions. The results are positive and align with the literature reviewed. The interview protocol provided all participants an opportunity to express their thoughts equally.

The primary question was: How do high school teachers who have demonstrated success in decreasing discipline referrals for African American male students describe their pedagogy? Participants emphasized the importance of building authentic
relationships with their students. The word relationship(s) was mentioned collectively by the participants 26 times. Teachers who understand the importance of relationships have a history of experiencing greater success when working with African American male students. An analysis of literature on classroom management in urban and racially diverse schools showed mutual respect and positive personal relationships between teachers and students strengthened the management of the classroom, which decreased the use of exclusionary school discipline (Milner, 2015). Participants were aware of the negative perceptions of African American male students and because of their working knowledge they used different strategies to reach these students. Most participants relied on positive relationships to limit negative behaviors. These teachers established a culture of respect and built rapport with students. They also set clear expectations and revisited them one-on-one with students who failed to meet them. Two participants mentioned how they pulled students in the hallway to have conversations to redirect their behaviors. One participant assigned leadership roles to students, stating it gave the students purpose and made them want to contribute to the classroom.

There were three secondary questions within this research study. The first secondary exploratory question was: What are the factors that influence the way African American male students are disciplined from the perspectives of teachers? Two participants stated some teachers use the referral process to start a paper trail to get rid of problematic students. Two participants emphasized how the process is different for students with good grades versus those who struggle academically; they discussed how favoritism influences the discipline process. The lack of relationships, especially for African American male students, influences the way students are disciplined.
Furthermore, participants discussed factors such as with whom the students are affiliated and their academic performance as precursors to how African American male students are disciplined. Participant C stated,

To me, it’s all about favoritism because if there is a student that has good grades, I feel like they get a little more leeway; I’m not saying that that’s bad. I’m just saying that the same energy you’re given to the ones with good grades, we have to figure out those whose grades are not as satisfactory, how we can then still build our relationships to possibly even help them with their grades and the fact that they’re struggling and see how it’s tied to their behavior. Many teachers in my building use referrals to get rid of students who are not doing so well in class. With African American males, obviously is much higher because a lot of them have so many other stresses that they’re going through. So it’s almost like instead of taking out the time to build a relationship with them, the referral process after doing one very minor thing is very heightened.

The second secondary question was: How do teachers describe their perceptions of African American male students? The participants did not have a general perception of African American male students in that some were able to identify particular traits but there was nothing consistent. Participants not having a perception of African American male students may be a leading factor in their success. Preconceived opinions put African American male students at a disadvantage. Biased attributions may therefore lead to a vicious cycle in which teachers expect Black male students to misbehave, treat these students with suspicion, remain more alert and sensitive to their misbehavior, and interpret ambiguous acts in an unfavorable light. Participants were aware of African
American male students’ general understanding, but did not accept the narrative as their own (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2015). As mentioned above, Participant B stated,

I think, in this society we as African American males are seen as a threat. We’re something to be feared and unfortunately I think it translates into the classroom. I mean, you see it in the news, you see it in the media, you see in movies that we are dangerous. We are like a separate entity. What I mean is that you have Black girls, White girls, White boys, but then you have that special classified category and you have to handle them differently. You have to handle them harsher more harshly than everyone else.

The last of the secondary questions in this research was: What are effective strategies teachers can use to successfully manage African American male students?

Participants used proximity, tone, self-regulation, and check-ins to de-escalate explosive behaviors. There was a consensus that giving students space and time to regulate their behavior is key. Most participants relied on positive relationships to limit negative behaviors. These teachers established a culture of respect and built rapport with students. They also set clear expectations and revisited them one-on-one with students who failed to meet them. Two participants mentioned how they pulled students in the hallway to have conversations with students. One participant assigned leadership roles to students, stating it gave the students purpose and made them want to contribute to the classroom.

**Recommendations**

In order to close the discipline gap, district leaders are going to have to equip teachers with the tools and resources to better manage African American male students’ behaviors. Ensuring teachers receive training in culturally responsive practices is crucial
to the work that needs to be done. Teachers should be given a platform, free of judgment, to address implicit and explicit biases. “The importance of racialized discipline disparities gained national attention in January 2014 when the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice jointly released federal policy guidelines on school discipline and school climate” (Staats, 2014, p. 41). The federal guidance package mentions implicit bias as a factor that may be affecting the administration of school discipline, encouraging school personnel to receive training that will “enhance staff awareness of their implicit or unconscious biases and the harms associated with using or failing to counter racial and ethnic stereotypes” (Lhamon & Samuels, 2014, p. 17).

Biases are a huge detriment to the success of African American male students. Studies in the fields of education and educational psychology highlight teachers’ attitudes and appraisals of African American male students’ abilities as well as the role these assessments play in determining interactions with students and overall student access to high-quality and rigorous coursework. (Kenyatta, 2012, p. 37) Additionally, teachers should receive de-escalation training to help redirect student behaviors and improve classroom management. Participants in this study said they used proximity, tone, self-regulation, and check-ins to de-escalate explosive behaviors. Participant A shared how he uses de-escalation strategies to regulate his behavior as well as that of his students,

I use proximity. Sometimes that means I need to step back from the student, sometimes that means I might have to step closer to a student. My tone of voice, and the way that I talk are important. Cadence, you know really making sure that I’m de-escalating. If I feel that I’m getting angry or I can feel my blood starting
to boil, I step back. I may have to step outside the room and breathe, take a couple breaths, to say a quick prayer whatever I gotta do to calm us down. Before making sure I don’t engage in a back and forth with a student.

Participants recommended several ways to improve the discipline disparity for African American male students. Four participants suggested some form of a mentoring program led by African American men who can teach young African American male students life skills, serve as a listening ear, and assist them with making better choices. One participant referenced meditation, describing restorative justice (RJ) practices.

My recommendations for all schools with a significant population of minority students is the implementation of a race-conscious RJ program. Restorative justice is a philosophical concept and an internationally accepted reaction to breaches of discipline, crime, and school law (F. E. Davis, Lyubansky, & Schiff, 2015). As a consequence of RJ, school systems around the country have seen a reduction in the use of exclusionary discipline. Teachers using good restorative methods seldom use exclusionary punishment for misconduct/defiance, are less likely to discipline African American and Latino students disproportionately, and have stronger overall relationships with their students (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016). The behavior management programs adopted in schools should include unbiased and culturally responsive policies. I encourage all school leaders, especially those in schools with a larger population of minority students, to reevaluate the system they use to regulate students. There is evidence of the success of RJ in reducing ethnic disparities in the use of discipline in schools (F. E. Davis et al., 2015).
Conclusion

Through intentionality and research-based strategies, school leaders can begin to close the discipline gap. We must work to resolve the position of unconscious bias and to put an end to racially unreasonable discipline (Staats, 2014). We must intentionally identify strategies that will address the discipline gap and eradicate the discipline disparity that exists for African American male students. The repercussions of school disciplinary decisions will extend far beyond the reach of the classroom and affect the broader life trajectory of students (Staats, 2014). As educators, it is our responsibility to ensure African American male students are given a fair opportunity and access to success both in and outside of school. Through their implementation of discipline and the decisions they make about student actions and how they respond to what is considered as wrongdoing, principals have tremendous power to alter the course of student lives (Farr et al., 2020).

The school-to-prison pipeline is a growing concern. In a subtle nod to the school-to-prison pipeline, the U.S. Department of Education (2014), in its guidance package, acknowledged that exclusionary school discipline can increase the odds of students becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The implementation of race-conscious RJ programs can help combat this national concern. These programs will help refine the behavior management program and improve discipline practices. A picture of an ideal state, considering these recommended changes, follows in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

To-Be Framework

Upon an extensive examination of the current state of the district, published research, best practices in school discipline, and findings gleaned from my research, a picture of a comprehensive and effective behavior management program emerged. In the previous chapter, I highlighted important changes that need to take place to address the discipline disparities for African American male students. As previously stated, we can no longer ignore the lack of culturally responsive practices in urban schools. We must begin to close the discipline gap by focusing attention on behavior management programs that are culturally responsive; this can be achieved through teacher preparation programs and PD. Growing evidence supports the view that school disparities among African Americans are better addressed through race-conscious interventions in teacher training and PD programs (Monroe, 2005).

Envisioning the Success To-Be

Wagner et al. (2006) guided leaders through the process of revising the As-Is to the To-Be, or goal state, by asking the question, “What would success look like if the problem you identified were solved?” (p. 119). Successful implementation of a race-conscious RJ program will require ongoing PD, a revision of current discipline policies, and the use of culturally responsive strategies. In this chapter, I elaborate on all the changes needed within the four arenas of change (i.e., context, culture, conditions, and competencies) using the 4 Cs diagnostic tool known as To-Be (see Appendix E). This completed visual represents the to-be picture, which is a systemic and dynamic vision of
the future to which you aspire (Wagner et al., 2006). The work that is necessary to achieve the vision is outlined in this chapter.

**Contexts.** Effective implementation of my change plan should result in fair and consistent discipline consequences for African American male students. Revisions to the current behavior management plan and school policies will be made to ensure they are both equitable and culturally responsive. Addressing the discipline disparities for African American male students will result in a decline in the number of discipline referrals issued at the classroom level, which will, in turn, cause a reduction in the use of exclusionary practices with African American male students. Reducing exclusionary discipline will result in an increase in the amount of instructional time African American male students receive. Additionally, Sunnyside School District 200 will no longer be identified by the ISBE as a district that uses exclusionary disciplinary measures more often than other districts.

**Culture.** Sunnyside School District will embody a culture based on trust and respect. A shared message will be communicated throughout the district and the community and a set of core values will be shared among all stakeholders. District leaders will broaden their focus to include best practices in all areas, not just those that affect academics, and will explore and implement RJ practices in place of the current behavior management plan, which has a punitive approach. An ongoing conversation and PDs will persist regarding fair and consistent discipline practices for all students. Teachers will make conscious efforts to build rapport with students through team-building activities. To develop higher levels of cultural competence, a deep and enduring respect and appreciation for the attitudes, values, and behaviors of others is important
(Sperry, 2012). Administration will be intentional about their approach to building trust among staff. The district will host quarterly diversity workshops to support staff. Stereotypes will no longer be used to demean students, but as a resource to learn more about students so better relationships can be formed. Teachers will receive cultural competency training to address biases and will be expected to model respect and move away from the “I am the adult” approach. Non-tenured teachers will be encouraged to share their input through special meetings designed to support newer staff members.

**Conditions.** District leaders will continue to focus on reading and math. However, they will add culturally responsive practices and RJ to their agenda. Time will be allocated throughout the year for PDs that will support my change initiative. Social workers and behavioral coaches will be available in all buildings to help teachers who struggle with making positive connections with African American male students or those teachers who express difficulty with self-efficacy. All teachers will have opportunities to vocalize concerns that affect the system at large. Deans will be responsible for sharing discipline data quarterly with staff. The data will be housed in a school-wide information system that has the capacity to generate reports unique to specific students, teachers, locations of behavior infractions, and types of behaviors identified.

The superintendent and members of the cabinet will support the change initiative by ensuring the message flows from the top. All stakeholders will be aware of the direction of the district. Information will be shared with parents and at annual conferences, parent meeting, and town hall meetings. The superintendent will review with the board the change plan and outline how we intend to accomplish our goals. Additionally, we will need proper funding to support the initiative and to provide
resources and PD to staff members. It is important for all staff members to have both the knowledge and skillset required to do the work—they must be competent.

**Competencies.** In an ideal situation, teachers and administrators would use culturally responsive practices when interacting with students of color, especially African American male students. “Specific to the education realm, increasing the cultural competence of teachers and administrators and making them more culturally responsive to their student populations is another approach that helps to counter discipline disparities while addressing implicit bias” (Staats, 2014, p. 14). The use of de-escalation strategies is apparent across the district by both teachers, administrators, and students, ultimately leading to a significant decline in subjective referrals and escalated conflicts.

Administrators and teachers lead ongoing PDs to keep staff abreast with information geared toward eliminating the discipline gap. Teachers welcome feedback as they seek opportunities to hold themselves accountable. Administrators and teachers build capacity together and engage in frequent conversations to address successes and challenges around current practices.

**Conclusion**

Adaptive leadership is a change that encourages the opportunity to succeed (Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009) and ensures an organization continues to move forward despite new challenges. In my case, the discipline disparity for African American male students is a challenge, although it is not new. Leaders in my district have yet to address this issue, so it remains a problem. I do not know why we refuse to discuss culturally sensitive topics, but I assume such discussions will create discomfort for some staff members. We need to build capacity in our district; we dwell in a very
safe space. The only changes we make are those required to meet state and local mandates regarding academics. We do not evolve in the same way as other organizations as teachers and some administrators depend on old processes to address new challenges. We cannot yield different results with the same practices. We must build capacity, shift the culture, change the conditions, and focus on the context of the problem to get the desired results. Over time, these and other cultural-shaping activities build the adaptive capacity of an organization and encourage processes that will produce new standards that allow the organization to meet the continuing stream of adaptive challenges presented by an environment that is always ready to deliver new facts, possibilities, and pressures (Heifetz et al., 2009).
CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions

Examining the current state of an organization and identifying the ideal state brings into focus strategies and actions necessary to bridge the “As-Is” to the “To-Be.” Using Wagner et al.’s (2006) change leadership model, I was able to identify focal areas that could move the district from its current state, which includes high suspension and expulsion rates for African American male students, to an organization that ensures equity in discipline practices for all students.

The discipline disparity is a concern within schools across the country. A growing body of research shows leaders of some schools are aggressively trying to close the discipline gap and have made some progress through the use of culturally responsive practices and programs such as RJ. The implementation of an RJ program requires administrators and teachers to shift their thinking. This change in thinking and the need to consider the interrelationships between the different components of the job provides leaders with an immense learning opportunity (Wagner et al., 2006). Educators can no longer rely on punitive practices and exclusionary discipline to redirect behavior. It is a disservice to students and damages their relationships with their teachers. Additionally, it creates a disparity for African American male students both in and outside of school. A New York Times editorial (“Racial Profiling in Preschool,” 2016) acknowledged the student discipline practices found in many U.S. schools were counterproductive because they produced disparities that put students at a greater risk of falling behind, dropping out, or ending up in the juvenile justice system (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009).
Strategies and Actions

The careful examination of the As-Is/To-Be diagnostic tool requires organizational leaders to identify the strategies and actions required to bring the completed visual into focus. This visual should help identify the landscape of work that is necessary to make progress on the problem in the As-Is picture (Wagner et al., 2006). To solve the discipline problem, I identified four main strategies. First, Sunnyside leaders should create a system of professional learning support for teachers to build capacity to ensure staff have the tools and skills necessary to effectively implement an RJ program. Second, Sunnyside leaders should develop a progress monitoring system to indicate the effectiveness of the program. Third, Sunnyside leaders should intentionally build trust between the administrative team and teachers, as this will make the heavy lifting associated with change easier to manage. Last, Sunnyside leaders should focus on decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline.

These four strategies are thoughtfully aligned with appropriate actions to bring about the organizational change needed to close the discipline gap. Professional development builds capacity and equips staff with what they need to be successful. Starkey et al. (2009) highlighted the imperatives of PD activities for teachers by saying “in-service teacher education is also often viewed as an extension of pre-service teacher education in ensuring teachers—whether new or experienced—have up to date snapshots of the knowledge needed to be effective” (p. 186). Needs assessments should be used to pinpoint specific areas of growth for individual teachers. Harris et al. (2005) found that when PD programs directly meet the individual needs of teachers, they are the most effective (as cited in Bayar, 2014).
To ensure all staff have the knowledge to implement and support restorative practices, district leaders will mandate building-wide PD. Administrators will conduct non-evaluative observations to capture teachers’ interactions with students as it relates to culturally responsive practices and RJ. Immediate feedback will be provided following observations. In professional learning communities, teachers will have opportunities to share successes as well as lean on colleagues for support in areas in which they are struggling.

After intense RJ training for teachers, Sunnyside leaders should develop a progress monitoring system to indicate its effectiveness. The district will use a school-wide information system to house discipline data that will be analyzed weekly and shared in data meetings. Prior to the analysis of data, Sunnyside leaders will develop SMART goals during scheduled goal-setting meetings. These goals will be built into the progress monitoring system and used to inform the effectiveness of the program. Surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and discipline data will also be used to measure the effectiveness of the program.

An acute focus on decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline is the foundation of this study. This strategy will help close the discipline gap. Some of the actions required to support this strategy are mentioned in action steps above. As previously mentioned, PD increases teachers’ capacity and allows them to acquire the skills they need to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. Teachers will be trained in RJ and culturally sensitive methods to redirect student actions without relying on exclusionary discipline. A recent analysis of an urban district that adopted restorative approaches
showed participants in the initiative were less likely to receive additional ODRs and suspensions (Anyon et al., 2016).

A review of discipline and referral data will be shared at regularly scheduled data meetings. Data collected from multiple sources, including the school-wide information system, will be shared as a tool to pinpoint PD opportunities for staff who continue to struggle with classroom management. Classroom observations will be conducted to assess the productiveness of knowledge acquired during PD. SMART goals will be used to monitor the effectiveness of the change plan.

Organizational change is no easy feat. Change is also related to a decrease in results and morale during implementation, meaning that when new initiatives are introduced, a school can often get worse (Louis, 2007). Sunnyside has a history of distrust between teachers and administrators, which makes it more challenging to change the overall system. Trust between administrators and teachers affects the effectiveness of program implementation. In order for structural reform to take place, more needs to be learned about how to change coherently distrustful school cultures (Louis, 2007). In schools, betrayal of trust between educators and administrators is prevalent and undermines efforts to improve (Hargreaves, 2002). Sunnyside leaders should work to intentionally build trust between the administrative team and teachers by improving communication, celebrating success, seeking out teachers’ professional input, providing regular feedback, and promoting team building. The strategies and actions table (Table 1) outlines how district leaders intend to achieve the “To-Be” proficiency and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline.
### Table 1

**Strategies and Actions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action</th>
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</table>
| Create a system of professional learning support for teachers to build capacity. | - Identify funding for PD.  
- Conduct a staff needs assessment.  
- Develop a PD calendar.  
- Train all evaluators on culturally responsive teaching and RJ.  
- Have teachers participate in professional learning communities.  
- Have administrators conduct walk-throughs and provide specific feedback.  
- Conduct surveys to assess effectiveness of PD. |
| Develop a progress monitoring system to indicate effectiveness. | - Implementation of a school-wide information system to monitor discipline referrals and consequences.  
- Analysis of discipline data to make informed decisions.  
- Regular data meetings.  
- Targeted classroom observations.  
- Collect baseline data.  
- Goal-setting meetings.  
- Continue data collection to include tools such as surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and discipline data.  
- Create a timeline for each goal. |
| Focus on decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline.    | - Provide building-wide training in culturally responsive teaching and RJ.  
- Provide additional support to teachers with high discipline referrals.  
- Ongoing PD.  
- Monthly discipline meetings.  
- Establish SMART goals. |
| Intentionally build trust between the administrative team and teachers. | - Improve communication.  
- Celebrate successes.  
- Seek out teachers’ professional input.  
- Conduct non-evaluative observations with feedback to facilitate teacher development and help teachers to understand the value of the process.  
- Incorporate team-building activities into the school calendar. |
Conclusion

Many factors contribute to the discipline disparity for African American male students. This harsh reality makes them more susceptible to exclusionary discipline, which affects their ability to thrive academically. Discipline and other statistics have portrayed a stark reality for students of color in the United States. Black male students are more likely to be disciplined or remembered for special education services and academic failure than their peers (Noguera, 2008). Conducting this program evaluation enabled me to diagnose the system by clarifying structures that exist within the district. Creating an As-Is/To-Be analysis allowed me to recognize the work required to change the organization’s approach to exclusionary discipline. The As-Is/To-Be diagnostic tool can also be used to build a better sense of the need for radical change—reinvention versus reform—and a common vision of accomplishment (Wagner et al., 2006).
CHAPTER SEVEN

Implications and Policy Recommendations

To ensure order is maintained and the environment is conducive to learning, effective disciplinary policies are required. In the United States, discipline is an integral element of public education and appropriate discipline methods are required to preserve the order of the classroom, encourage student learning, and ensure the safety of students and teachers (Mayworm & Sharkey, 2014). As school leaders work to create optimal conditions for learning, they must consider discipline policies that are fair and inclusive. Discipline policies must be equitable to narrow the discipline disparities that exist for African American male students. Research highlights a plethora of reasons why African American male students have the highest number of behavioral infractions in schools. Monroe (2005) suggested the criminalization of Black males, race and class privilege, and zero tolerance policies contribute to the disparities that exist. Though one single factor cannot be solely responsible for inequitable discipline practices, acknowledgment of a flawed system is in order. Current practices weigh heavier on African American male students, leaving them more susceptible to exclusionary discipline or harsher consequences. Research has shown that for boys, students of color, and students with disabilities—classes that have traditionally experienced higher rates of suspension and expulsion—the negative effects of exclusionary punishment are more pronounced (Scott et al., 2017). School district leaders need to reevaluate their discipline policies to change the trajectory of what is happening in schools across the country.

It is essential to review discipline practices to ensure they are not contributing to the discipline gap, but are effective and fair for all students. In most situations, school or
district leaders have the autonomy to determine which discipline policies they implement. It is important to remember that the specifics of school discipline policies are developed and implemented at the district or school level in many states (Scott et al., 2017). Allowing school and district leaders the autonomy to determine what practices work best for their students helps address discipline disparities and makes it easier to implement policy revisions.

In 2009, a comprehensive school-wide behavior management system was implemented in Sunnyside School District 200. The primary benefits of the system were that it (a) eliminated 85% of day-to-day problems immediately, (b) increased teaching and learning time dramatically, (c) contributed to school-wide consistency, (d) reduced stress, (e) helped students learn civil and responsible behavior, and (f) ensured teachers enjoy teaching. The system’s framework required teachers to follow a series of steps to address inappropriate behaviors through the Rule of Three:

- If a student reaches 3 steps in one day, then a FRO (For Record Only) Referral should be written, and the student should be sent to the deans’ office for a conference. The teacher and dean should make contact with the student’s parent or guardian.
- If a student reaches 3 steps over multiple days in less than two weeks, the student should be advanced in the teacher’s behavior log to the next step. For every infraction after this, it may become necessary to use the step that seems to prevent repetitive behavior effectively.
• If a student does not appear in the behavior log over a two-three week period, they should be removed from the behavior log. However, the teacher may go back to the effective step if necessary.

Note: A call should be made home after the second violation.

The expectation was for all teachers to implement the system to address possible behavior infractions, which would reduce discipline referrals. Although this was accomplished, the system created tension between teachers and students; it created a hostile learning environment because students were always on edge about receiving consequences that were aligned with the system framework. Bear (2012) argued that the effectiveness of discipline policies should not be based solely on reductions in discipline referrals, but also on measures of school climate and safety (Mayworm & Sharkey, 2014). A system such as the one mentioned will affect tier 1 students. However, tier 2 and tier 3 students will have challenges adhering to a policy designed to highlight behaviors their teachers warrant are inappropriate. Deterrence works well for some students when punishment is administered equally through a carefully planned and commonly accepted disciplinary framework, but it has been shown to contribute to multiple negative results for students with more severe behavioral problems (e.g., dropout, delinquency; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

The adopted policy did not include any consideration of students with serious behavior concerns or those with disabilities. These students continued to receive discipline referrals that led to exclusionary consequences. The inconsistent implementation across the district caused confusion. Students viewed teachers who followed the system as rigid or strict. Those teachers who strayed away from the policy
were deemed “nice.” Teachers encountered power struggles with students as well as ignorance from students with severe behavior issues. Unlike policies that impede on teacher influence, the success of this policy was contingent upon teacher implementation. Teachers were at the forefront of the policy, meaning that if their biases or lack of training influenced which students were disciplined and why, the disparity gap widened. The policy did not promote cultural competency as it relates to disciplinary practices. Previous work has shown that instructor attributes, such as the teacher’s own race, can influence the probability that minority students will undergo exclusive discipline with respect to racial differences in discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

In 2015, Senate Bill 100 was passed in Illinois, which forced district leaders to revisit their discipline policies to ensure alignment. A modified version of the system was introduced, but very little changed. Changes in building administration weighed on the effectiveness of the plan; currently, the intentions behind the plan are slowly fading. The language used to articulate expectations with students raised eyebrows in recent years. The Teacher Creed is communicated to all students in every classroom several times throughout the year and is a significant component of the plan.

Teacher Creed:

- “As your teacher, I will not tolerate any student in this classroom stopping me from teaching for any reason whatsoever.
- As our teacher, I will not tolerate any student in this classroom stopping another student from learning for any reason whatsoever.
- As your teacher, I will not tolerate any student in this classroom doing anything that is not in your best interest or the best interest of the class.
As your teacher, I am a member of this classroom; there are two things you will never do with me:

1. No Manipulations
2. Never question my management system while I am teaching.”

The language is not student-friendly or sensitive to students’ needs and it does not foster a sense of collaboration between students and teachers. Students violating the Creed receive a reprimand, which contributes to the culture and climate across the district. As the policy fades, many teachers are creating their own classroom management plans. They are removing the system from their classrooms and putting students out of class. All discipline infractions, minor or major, are pushed to deans with the request for harsher consequences. Students are sent out of class for subjective reasons and by routine teachers. Teachers make decisions at the classroom level on when, how, and whom to discipline (Curran, 2017). The goal of the proposed policy is to ensure teachers are using the right approach when addressing discipline. The absence of policies, practices, and PD that equips teachers with tools to meet the needs of all students leads to inequities. If teachers lack the expertise, abilities, and self-efficacy to avoid and resolve perceived problem behavior, they are more likely to rely on exclusionary discipline to address problem behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 2003).

**Policy Statement**

To improve discipline practices that weigh heavier on African American male students, a policy must be presented that considers their well-being and acknowledges the needs of teachers to ensure effective implementation. It is my recommendation to implement a race-conscious RJ program. An RJ program is not enough to combat the
discipline gap. Educators must know how to work with students of various races in the absence of prejudices, biases, and stereotypes. An RJ program is one step toward equity, and cultural competency is another. F. E. Davis et al. (2015) stated that to model the changes necessary for a racially just world, RJ practitioners must become skilled in negotiating across racial and other differences. According to these authors, one strategy is to embed “unlearning racism” components and tutorials on racialized mass incarceration and school discipline strategies in all standard RJ training. The researchers discussed the importance of collaborating with other disciplines to develop a race-conscious program.

A race-conscious program starts with people understanding their stereotypes as they relate to other ethnicities. The theory of "cultural competence" is used by both psychotherapy practitioners and those in the business sector to define the sensitivity and communication skills required to work efficiently across cultural, racial and ethnic boundaries, while acknowledging that there are no objective requirements for a “culturally competent” practitioner (F. E. Davis et al., 2015). Through the implementation of a race-conscious RJ program, I would like all stakeholders to become culturally competent and, in doing so, work to eliminate the discipline disparity that exists for African American male students. My goal is to create a culture that promotes equity and equality for all students in all capacities, including discipline. Through PD, honest conversations, and continuous reflection, staff and administration will create non-exclusionary practices to redirect undesirable behaviors exhibited by all students. Additionally, I would like to see a shift from the use of punitive consequences to RJ practices. Restorative practices allow school leaders the chance to respond politely to the
negative actions of students while providing an inclusive, educational, non-punitive approach to making things right for everyone concerned (Kline, 2016).

Analysis of Needs

There is substantial research to support the need for culturally competent policies as well as the use of RJ practices. Additionally, leaders of Illinois school districts are given the autonomy to determine which discipline policies they use as long as they are aligned with Senate Bill 100 and federal laws. The principal has the power and duty at the school level to set school-wide behavioral standards and to prescribe punishment for serious violations (Curran, 2017). Teachers and staff may be resistant to a new policy, but clear expectations and ongoing PD can yield greater support. There are areas of consideration when presenting a new policy. To address possible implications of the recommended policy, I review the six distinct disciplinary areas through educational analysis, economic analysis, social analysis, political analysis, legal analysis, and moral and ethical analysis.

Educational analysis. Exclusionary discipline results in students losing instructional time. It is reported that well over three million children have missed instructional seat time and were suspended from school in 2009–2010, mostly without assurance of adult supervision (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 10).

The use of exclusionary discipline weighs heavy on African American male students not only because it creates negative interactions with adults and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline, but because it undoubtedly forces students to miss excessive numbers of days, which affects the amount of instruction time they receive. It is our responsibility as educators to ensure students are given an opportunity to be
successful both in and outside of school. While the educational environment is dynamic and ever-changing, there is still the belief that education is a road to opportunity in our society (Staats, 2014). Education is indeed the precursor to opportunity; an inability to read and write is definitely disadvantageous in today’s society of competitive job searches. Students need the skills, exposure, and knowledge to thrive globally. Implementation of an RJ program can reduce exclusionary discipline and put students in a better position to thrive academically.

**Economic analysis.** Continuing PD for teachers and a national plan to help teachers achieve their untapped potential must be developed in order to strengthen the U.S. education system (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000). I am concerned about the district’s financial ability to support the program considering the need for training and PD. To ensure proper implementation, proper funding must be provided. If not, inconsistent practices will impede the possible success of the program. The goal is to calibrate throughout implementation and readjust when necessary. Such work will require ongoing PD and resources.

**Social analysis.** As outlined in my change plan, having a common vision and project transparency, implemented with a clearly established purpose of meeting student needs, will improve their performance and enhance frameworks (S. Davis, 2020). One of the components currently missing from the organization is a shared vision and mission. To properly implement the program, we must ensure all stakeholders understand the why. A detailed overview of the program’s intended goals as well a plan outlining how the program will be implemented must be shared with all stakeholders.
SMART goals will be developed in alignment with the vision and mission. SMART goals are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time sensitive. Such goals allow for an assessment of the effectiveness of the program. During the development of these goals, representation from all stakeholders will be solicited as a means to increase buy-in.

**Political analysis.** Policies are not always equitable and can implicate one group of people at a disproportionate rate. An in-depth analysis of the current student handbook and school discipline policies is necessary to close the discipline gap. To counter unfair practices and build a more equal climate, culturally sensitive policies can be used (F. E. Davis et al., 2015). One strategy is to embed “unlearning racism” components and tutorials on racialized mass incarceration and school discipline strategies in all standard RJ trainings. Restorative justice aligned language should be incorporated in the student handbook. Such language supports Public Act 099-0456, formerly known as Senate Bill 100.

**Legal analysis.** The ISBE is aware of the discipline gap and holds school districts accountable through metrics that target the top 20% of districts with high numbers of exclusionary consequences. The ISBE gives district leaders the autonomy to develop a plan detailing how they intend to close the discipline gap. An RJ program is an acceptable intervention to reduce exclusionary discipline. Restorative methods in schools have typically reduced suspensions and evictions, decreased administrative referrals, increased student results, and decreased aggressive and serious actions (F. E. Davis et al., 2015). The use of RJ does not put the district in any particular risk of legal concerns. The program is used in districts around the country as well as the penal system and has a
history of yielding positive results. In January 2014, the U.S. Justice and Education Departments initiated an initiative to help schools use RJ and other means to fulfill their legal duty to administer non-discriminatory discipline (F. E. Davis et al., 2015).

**Moral and ethical analysis.** There is a moral and ethical responsibility on the part of all educators to make sure all students receive a quality education. Unfortunately, biases and stereotypes affect how students are treated in school, leaving some students at a disadvantage. An increasing body of scholarship is dedicated to understanding how implicit racial bias can permeate educational environments, often with negative implications for students of color (Staats, 2014). To combat this despair, teachers and school officials must receive proper PD. Teachers must possess the knowledge and skillset to address the discipline disparity. In fact, increasing research shows improving teacher awareness and teaching skills is crucial to increasing student success (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000). Teachers need to participate in ongoing cultural competency training prior to the implementation of a race-conscious RJ program. Such training will enable the program to be more effective because teachers are relying on practices that are culturally responsive. Increasing the cultural competence of teachers can help counter cultural misunderstandings that can lead to excessive disciplinary action (Staats, 2014).

**Implications for Staff and Community Relationships**

In my opinion, staff buy-in and changing an operation’s culture both pose great challenges for the new policy. Culture is characterized as the common values, beliefs, aspirations, expectations, and behaviors associated with students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and outside of school (Wagner et al., 2006). Tenured teachers set the tone and profoundly influence
the culture; whether it be negatively or positively, they are the heart of the district. Getting all teachers to believe in the new policy will require a commitment from tenured teachers because they are the most vocal and influential. Administrators will need to partner with tenured teachers to communicate the benefits of a race-conscious RJ program.

All stakeholders need to understand how the program is aligned with academic goals. If teachers, in particular, are unable to make the connection, they will be less likely to support the program and it will fail much like the original behavioral management system. If teachers do not understand why they use specific discipline methods and have not gained a clear understanding of the ultimate educational aims of these practices, they will not be able to select the discipline policies of greatest importance and ethical merit (Mayworm & Sharkey, 2014). Clear communication addressing the benefits of the program and the effort to close the discipline gap should be intentional, timely, and consistent. Given the policy for which they are advocating, district-level administrators should ask the following questions: What are the implications for staff relationships? What are the implications for community relationships? What are other stakeholder relationships you should consider? What are the implications for those relationships?

Conclusion

A shared message will be communicated throughout the district and the community to introduce the new policy and a set of core values will be shared among all stakeholders. Ongoing conversation and PD will persist regarding fair and consistent discipline practices for all students. District leaders will broaden their focus to include
best practices in all areas, not just those that affect academics, and will implement RJ practices while at the same time grooming culturally competent educators. To develop higher levels of cultural competence, deep and enduring respect and appreciation for the attitudes, values, and behaviors of others are important (Sperry, 2012). Teachers will make conscious efforts to build rapport with students. Stereotypes will no longer be used to demean students, but as a way to learn more about students as a means to build rapport.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

“Why are ‘Bad Boys’ Always Black?” (Monroe, 2005) is the title of one of the first articles I read when beginning this journey. The title of the article resonated with me as I began to reflect on my experiences that seemingly always depicted African American male students as either bad or dumb, or both. As an African American woman, I am able to see the value in Black boys as there are Black men and Black boys throughout my family who are intelligent, hardworking, and men of great character.

As a teacher, I recall African American male students being some of my favorite kids simply because of the energy they brought into the room. When having a bad day, I could surely count on one of them to crack a joke or ask an inquisitive question that would catch me off guard, causing my mood to shift. I did not view African American male students as problematic nor did I have any preconceived notions about them as a whole. Each one brought their own unique personality into the classroom, which is what I expected from adolescents. Much like my participants, I was able to build authentic relationships with African American male students, which reduced unwarranted behaviors.

I attribute my success in working with African American male students to my pedagogy. Pedagogy refers to the professional philosophy, academic discipline, and practice of teachers used to fulfill the general criteria for achieving educational, developmental and educational objectives (Zogla, 2018). While completing this study, I discovered a more specific pedagogy called relational pedagogy, which contains a greater focus on an individual’s perception of relationships. Relational pedagogy is known as the
motivating force to understand ourselves and others (in whatever capacity: learner, instructor, policymaker, and implementer) and to make sense of others and make sense of ourselves because of others (Papatheodorou, 2003). Relational pedagogy creates a space for individuals to examine their biases and behavior in response.

When teachers are asked to describe their pedagogy, most will immediately highlight their thoughts on lesson plans, curriculum, and instructional strategies. However, there is a need for teachers to begin thinking about the relational part. How do they view others? How do they view themselves? Many educators have established low expectations, deficit thinking, and implicit prejudices against African American male students and their ability to act properly and academically achieve (Brinkley et al., 2018).

**Discussion**

The implementation of a race-conscious RJ program can assist with closing the discipline gap. Restorative methods in schools have typically reduced suspensions and evictions, decreased administrative referrals, increased student results, and decreased aggressive and serious actions (F. E. Davis et al., 2015). Effective implementation of RJ requires ongoing PD not only in the theory and practice of RJ, but in culturally responsive practices as well. Teachers must be competent in these areas if we are to see a shift in discipline data. The National Staff Development Council’s set of standards and guidelines for staff development includes set clear, high standards for learning for all students; holds superintendents, principals, and teachers accountable; invests in teacher learning; reviews school improvement plans; involves all teachers in continuous, intellectually rigorous study of what and how they teach; embeds opportunities for professional learning and collaboration into the school day; provides teachers with
classroom assessment and action research skills; and recognizes the importance of skillful school and district leaders (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

The “As-Is” 4 Cs tool will be used as a diagnostic measure to identify other areas of focus, such as trust among teachers and administrators. Intentional communication, team building, and platforms for discussion will be embedded into the plan. The plan will include a PD calendar, a timeline detailing the rollout of the program, and targeted dates designed to address the why behind the initiative.

**Leadership Lessons**

As a leader and educator, conducting this study reiterated the significance of data-driven decisions, meaningful PD, and relationship building. As often as possible, decisions should be made using some form of data. For example, every year we adopt programs and initiatives to improve student growth. What we never do is truly look at the data at a granular level. We should look at teachers, students, and school and district data to determine which programs we implement. Oftentimes we arbitrarily try to “fix” the problem without doing a deep dive. The reality is that depending on the data, change may get uncomfortable. Hard truths may be revealed, which is necessary to improve the organization. Changes in organizations are dynamic, incomplete, and sometimes messy (Bal et al., 2018).

Limited experience often creates challenges, including ineffective implementation. Intentional PD is an essential part of a strategic plan and proper implementation, as staff must be competent. The lack of meaningful feedback from administration, transparent and authentic conversations, and meaningful PD all affect teacher competency. We must acknowledge how adult deficits influence student success.
A consistent takeaway throughout the study was a need for ongoing PD with follow up. Specifically, we need PD to support teachers’ understanding of RJ. Teachers need to shift the way they view discipline. They often become upset when students do not receive severe consequences, which correlates to exclusionary discipline practices. Staff competency is a crucial component of any successful program, especially one that requires a growth mindset.

Successful programs include a number of variables. However, conducting this study taught me that relationships make the work a lot more manageable. It is easier to have uncomfortable conversations when relationships are established. Although we emphasize the importance of relationships between teachers and administrators, equally as critical are strong relationships between teachers and students. Teachers have to get to know their African American male students by developing positive personal relationships to create bridges, alter narratives, and influence performance (Brinkley et al., 2018). It has been suggested that teachers fear African American students. Skiba et al. (2002) argued,

Fear may contribute to over-referral of students of color. Teachers who are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent African American males as threatening or dangerous may overreact to relatively minor threats to authority, especially if their anxiety is paired with a misunderstanding of cultural norms of social interaction.

(as cited in Skiba, 2000, p. 12)

Teachers who are culturally responsive understand the need to know their students. In order to know their students, teachers must form relationships with students that are genuine. As Participant A stated,
Just being authentic, I think is the biggest thing. You’re not going to get anywhere trying to be somebody that you’re not trying to relate to a person in a way that you think they can relate to. Because Black males think it is kind of condescending. Just being yourself and, again, being in a position where you put in time, energy and the work necessary to build a relationship.

Furthermore, empirical results support that culturally sensitive teachers are more relaxed in their roles as disciplinarians, less likely to write disciplinary referrals, and have better relationships with students and parents than their peers (Monroe, 2005).

**Conclusion**

I recently read a book in which the author talked about the threatened extinction of African American males. I pondered over the idea and began to carefully examine the systemic racism that exists that consistently puts African American men and boys at a disadvantage. Whether it is in the workplace, school, or community, African American men and boys are viewed as negative and often put in situations that do not foster growth and opportunity. Although the actions of African American youth frequently fuel pejorative assumptions that distinguish Black men and boys as problematic and dangerous, they thrive to claim self-affirming identities in adverse environments (Monroe, 2005).

Educators have a huge impact on the success of African American male students. We must ensure they are properly educated and possess the tools they need to thrive in society. If we play into the false narrative created about African American male students, we contribute to the problem. As my principal always says, “if you are not a part of the solution, you are a part of the problem.” We must fix those systems and policies that are
inequitable instead of focusing our attention on fixing African American male students. As previously stated, leaders in Guilford County Schools are approaching the discipline gap strategically. Instead of “fixing” boys of color, district administrators sought to shift the attitudes and behaviors of adults by strengthening interactions between teachers and students and resolving unconscious prejudices between educators in two areas: early literacy and disciplinary policies (Brinkley et al., 2018).

Educators must begin to understand that their pedagogy goes beyond the curriculum they teach and extends to relationships. How do you view yourself? How do you view others? It is these self-reflecting moments that guide our practice. If I do not believe you are intelligent, I will not teach you rigorous content. If I believe you are a criminal, I will treat you like a criminal, which may cause you to behave as such. Black men and boys are socially typecast and face a persistent internal struggle of matching these false characteristics into expectations (Emdin, 2012).

Our philosophy influences our practice. James Baldwin said, “I can’t believe what you say, because I see what you do.” I have heard many teachers profess their passion for teaching in urban schools. However, I cannot believe them because I see how they treat minority students. I see the below grade level work they assign, their use of exclusionary discipline to rid themselves of “bad” kids, gradebooks with no grades 3 weeks into the quarter, call logs nearly empty, and above all failing students. As educators we must do better. A generation of students are depending on us—our Black boys are depending on us.
References


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Appendix A

Informed Consent

My name is Kimberly Kimbrough, and I am a student at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in this study, “How do teachers’ pedagogy influence the ways in which African American males are disciplined? An in-depth study examining discipline in a high school setting”, occurring from 01-2020 to 04-2020. The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers’ pedagogy impact the ways in which they discipline African American males. For this study, teachers will share their pedagogy and how it shapes their perception of African American males as it relates to discipline. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Kimberly Kimbrough, student, at National Louis University, Chicago. Please understand that the purpose of the study is to explore teachers’ pedagogy and how it shapes their discipline practices.

Participation in this study will include:

• 1 individual interview scheduled at your convenience in the spring of the 2019-20 academic year.
  o Interviews will last up to 50 min. and include approximately 10 questions to understand how teachers describe their pedagogy.
  o Interviews will be recorded and participants may view and have final approval on the content of interview transcripts.

• 1 fifty-minute observation to gain contextual understanding and observe teachers’ interactions with students during classroom instruction.
  o Kimberly Kimbrough will take field notes during classroom observations to capture the ways teachers interact with students (e.g. taking observational notes, asking reflective questions, whispering to students)
Participants may view field notes and have final approval on the content of field notes.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences, and employed to inform discipline practices, but participants’ identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). To ensure confidentiality the researcher will secure recordings, transcripts, and field notes in a locked cabinet in her home office. Only Kimberly Kimbrough will have access to data.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to schools and school districts looking to initiate or refine discipline disparities.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, 
kimberlykimbrough75@gmail.com to request results from this study.

In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Kimberly Kimbrough, KimberlyKimbrough75@gmail.com.

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that has not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact Dr. Harrington Gibson, the co-Chairs of NLU’s Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-3526; or Dr. Kathleen Cornett; email: kcornett@nl.edu; phone: (844) 380-5001. Co-chairs are located at National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for your consideration.
Consent: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study. My participation will consist of the activities below during 01-2020 to 04-2020 time period:

- 1 Interview lasting approximately 50 minutes each
- 1 fifty-minute observation of my classroom

_________________________  __________________________
Participant’s Signature       Date

_________________________  __________________________
Researcher’s Signature       Date
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. The purpose of this interview is to gain ideas for closing the discipline gap for African American males. All answers will remain confidential. Before we begin, I would like to review a few ground rules for the discussion.

● I am going to ask you several questions in sequential order.
● Your opinions are valued. The more you share the more I learn.
● Please speak from your own experience.
● A digital recording of this discussion is being made today. I am also taking notes. These tools are only being used as a means to accurately document information. All answers will be deemed confidential. You will remain anonymous in all accounts of this research. Upon completion of the study all materials, including recordings, will be destroyed associated with this study. During the course of this research all materials will be kept password-protected.
● This discussion is going to take 50 minutes.
● Explicit oral explanations will be given at all times and may be asked for further clarification at any time.
● You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time without penalty.

Please feel free to ask any questions before we get started.
Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. What is your perception of African American males?

2. How do you feel discipline is handled in your building?

3. In what ways do you think discipline procedures can be improved?

4. In looking at the ways in which African American males are disciplined compared to their counterparts of other ethnicities, do you feel that consequences are the same?

5. In your classroom/office, how do you address adverse behaviors specifically for African American males?

6. Have you received de-escalation training?

7. In which ways do you de-escalate behaviors in your classroom?

8. Do you feel consequences are equally distributed in your classroom? (or throughout the building)

9. In what ways can discipline procedures be improved for African American males?

10. What strategies do you feel work best with African American males?
Appendix D

“As-Is” 4 Cs

“As Is” 4 C’s Analysis for Discipline Disparities for African American Males

Context
- AA males receive more severe consequence in comparison to their peers
  - AA males are out of the classroom at a higher rate (ISS, OSS, expulsion)
  - Teaching and learning cannot occur if students are not present

Conditions
- Opportunities to discuss culturally responsive strategies
  - Frequency & structure
    - Opportunities to provide PDs
      - De-escalation strategies
        - Culturally responsive practices
          - Restorative Justice
    - Relevant data
    - Tonal teacher set the tone
    - Administration do not feel comfortable discussing implicit and explicit biases
      - No platform to discuss biases
      - No identified support or resources to address the discipline gap
    - Punitive behavior management program coach for teachers
      - district support

Discipline Disparities for African America Males

Competencies
- Teachers unfamiliar with culturally responsive practices
- Administration unfamiliar with culturally responsive practices
- Teachers inconsistently utilize de-escalation strategies
- Staff not receptive to honest feedback
- Teachers and or administrator’s do not have capacity to lead ongoing PDs in areas such as cultural competence & responsive justice
- Teachers & administration do not have the capacity to develop and implement action plan
Appendix E

“To-Be” 4 Cs

“To Be” 4 C’s Analysis for Discipline Disparities for African American Males

Context
- Elimination of discipline disparities for African American males
  - Reduction in the number of referrals African American males receive
  - Fair consequences
  - Increase in African American males attendance (reduction OSS, ISS, expulsion)

Culture
- Trusting relationship between teachers and administration
- Trusting relationship between teachers and students
- Shared core values among all stakeholders
- Consistent focus across the district
- All voices are heard and respected
- Focus on cultural awareness district-wide
  - Diversity training
  - All stakeholders are respected by one another
  - Restorative Justice Program in place of punitive consequences
  - Stereotypes addressed to reduce biased consequences

Conditions
- Time devoted to discuss culturally sensitive topics
  - Frequency & structure
  - Time designated for PDs
  - De-escalation
  - Cultural awareness
  - Restorative Justice
- Relevant data
  - Used to guide decisions
- All teachers are vocal
- Topics can be discussed openly with all stakeholders
- Resources provided to support staff
  - Behavioral coach for teachers
  - Initiative supported by Central Office

Discipline Disparities for African American Males

Competencies
- Teachers familiar with culturally sensitive practices
- Administration familiar with culturally sensitive practices
- Teachers consistently utilize de-escalation strategies
- Teachers trained in de-escalation strategies
- Administration/trained in de-escalation strategies
- There is a capacity for teachers and administration to engage in uncomfortable conversations
- Teachers are receptive to honest feedback
- Teachers and/or administrators possess the capacity to lead ongoing PDs