AN ANALYSIS OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES OF BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS

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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by:
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Dissertation entitled

AN ANALYSIS OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES OF BLACK AND
WHITE STUDENTS

Presented by Margaret Griffith,
a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Kennedy Ongaga

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Dr. T.C. Wall
DEDICATION

For my dad. Enough said, this is for you.

To my husband and children. Thank you for your patience, understanding, and encouragement. Life is good.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ii

LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................................vii

LIST OF TABLES .....................................................................................................................vii

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................ix

Contents

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION .................................1

Introduction .............................................................................................................................2

Statement of Problem ..............................................................................................................3

Purpose of the Study ...............................................................................................................5

Research Questions Guiding Study .......................................................................................6

Conceptual Framework ..........................................................................................................6

Design of the Study ...............................................................................................................8

Setting ...................................................................................................................................9

Participants ..........................................................................................................................9

Data Collection Tools .........................................................................................................9

Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................12

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls .................................................................15

Positionality ........................................................................................................................15

Ethical Practices ................................................................................................................16

Trustworthiness ..................................................................................................................17

Confidentiality .....................................................................................................................18
Transferability ............................................................................................................. 18
Definition of Key Terms ............................................................................................... 18
Significance of the Study ............................................................................................... 19
Summary of Study .......................................................................................................... 19
SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY ............................ 21
Background of the Context ............................................................................................ 22
Early District History ...................................................................................................... 22
History of Education for Black Children in the District .............................................. 23
Current District Status .................................................................................................. 24
District Leadership Structure ......................................................................................... 25
District Priorities ........................................................................................................... 27
District Mission ............................................................................................................ 28
District Five Focus Areas .............................................................................................. 29
Implications for Research in Practitioner Setting ......................................................... 35
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 37
SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY ............................ 38
Scholarly Context .......................................................................................................... 39
Public Schools ............................................................................................................... 40
Inequitable Use of Exclusionary Discipline for Multiple Marginalized Groups ......... 41
Inequitable Use of Exclusionary Discipline Between Black and White students .......... 44
Critical Race Theory ..................................................................................................... 48
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determinations</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION SIX: SELF-REFLECTION</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Analysis</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Traits and Strengths</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative Learning</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating Organizational Structure</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating Policy Development</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating Data Collection and Utilization</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing Diversity</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Reflections</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Data Sources Aligned with Research Questions</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. District Organizational Chart 2021-2022</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. District Leadership Team Structure</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Summarization of Studies</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Population of Black to White Ratio</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Black to White Ratio of Behavior Incidents</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Black to White Ratio of Unduplicated Student Behavior Incidents</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Summary of Survey Responses to Questions 1-10</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

In the existing literature, there is evidence of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline, however, there is an absence of literature examining why this discrepancy exists in light of substantial efforts to address the problem. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to address these concerns. First, the study examines any existing disparities in school discipline within a Midwest school district. Then, the study seeks to determine what contributing factors have led to an environment where Black students may receive exclusionary discipline significantly more often than their White counterparts. Quantitative findings from this mixed-methods study confirmed Black students received exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than White students at the school district, despite a reduction in the overall use of exclusionary discipline in the district. Qualitative data revealed

- some, but not all, district staff believe there was a significant disparity in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students
- all participants agreed the district policies regarding exclusionary discipline are imprecise, subjective, and inconsistent
- all participants identified the primary cause of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline were identified as staff members’ lack of appreciation for cultural and ethnic differences

The researcher recommends a three-fold approach to ameliorate this inequity. These include sharing these findings with all employees, providing sensitivity training for employees, and moving toward more objective criteria for the assignment of exclusionary discipline.
Section One

Introduction to the Dissertation in Practice
Introduction

There is a continuing issue in a Midwest school district, and the recent nationwide tensions regarding racial inequities makes this situation particularly relevant and its solution especially urgent. In the district there is a significantly higher rate of disciplinary actions directed toward Black students than White students. During the 2018-2019 school year 17% of Black students were disciplined, while White students’ disciplinary rate was slightly over 10% (dese.mo.gov, 2020). There were 5,000 instances of discipline directed toward White students, while Black students were disciplined 1,700 times (dese.mo.gov, 2020).

These statistics are more revealing when one observes the demographic statistics. The district has approximately 24,500 students in grades K-12 (dese.mo.gov, 2020). The district's racial composition is: White 74%, Black 8%, Hispanic 7%, multi-racial 6%, Asian 3%, Pacific Islander 1%, and Native American 1% (The district, 2020). Relative to disciplinary actions, there are nearly 10 times as many White students as Black, but only 3 times as many incidents of discipline of White students as their Black classmates. This disparity in reporting of incidents suggests Black students are judged more harshly than White students. In this regard the district is not unique. Several districts have similar issues (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Garba & Tajalli, 2014; Johnson, 2017; Martin et al., 2016; Porowski et al., 2014; Quin, 2019).

The disparity in treatment of students based on racial and ethnic backgrounds is well documented, and surfaces most frequently in disciplinary actions (dese.mo.gov, 2020). Recognition of this disparity has led to an acceptance of the need for equity
awareness and training. However, there does not appear to be an overriding theory that drives the proposed training.

**Statement of Problem**

There are significant discipline disparities between White, non-marginalized students and all other groups of students. The inequities are evidenced through the district’s data points regarding disciplinary events, student attendance, graduation rates, and student achievement (dese.mo.gov, 2020). The disparity is especially pronounced when comparing the data points of White students and Black students.

The data regarding incidents resulting in disciplinary action revealed White students were involved in 67% of the incidents, while Black students were involved in 26% of the incidents. Restated, these data demonstrate that a quarter of the disciplinary events at the district involved a racial group representing less than 10% of the enrollment (dese.mo.gov, 2020). By way of additional comparison, the third largest ethnic group in the district is students who identify as Hispanic. These students comprise 7% of the total enrollment, but represent only 5% of the students receiving disciplinary action (The district, 2019). Clearly, there is a discrepancy in the disciplinary action directed toward Black students as opposed to that experienced by other racial groups.

Research (eg. Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Garba & Tajalli, 2014; London et al., 2016; Moussa, 2017; Mullet, 2014; and Rogers et al., 2017) indicates a correlation between the inequities in discipline and the attendance and graduation rates for Black students. Further research also suggests Black students score lower on standardized tests than White students (Black et al., 1994; Ding & Navarro, 2004; Froese-Germain, 2001; Hsiung et al., 1994; Supovitz & Brennan, 1997; Syverson, 2009; U.S. Department of
Additionally, research confirms that lower attendance rates correlate with lower test scores (London et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). As a result of these realities, Black students have a higher dropout percentage rate than White students and may experience a less promising future (Kubina Jr., & McConnell, 2014; Moussa, 2017; Rogers et al., 2016; Quin, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

While the district has recognized the inequities in the disciplinary practices, there continue to be disparities. It is apparent that current diversity education and expectations are not adequate to ensure teachers are well grounded in the need for sensitivity to student differences. Moreover, there is not a comprehensive evaluation of the efforts the district is making to address the inequities identified. There needs to be a concentrated effort to recognize and analyze inequitable disciplinary practices and their causes. There is no analysis of the evidence available to the district. Such an analysis would lead to a theory-based program of equity awareness training for all educators and administrators.

In the existing literature, there is evidence of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline; in-school-suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), and expulsion. There is also evidence which indicates some teachers and administrators tend to, perhaps unintentionally, use exclusionary discipline with Black students in situations where they would be less likely to use it with White students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Policies and procedures to promote equal treatment regardless of any social, racial, ethnic, economic, or other factors have been instituted and are monitored for compliance. Yet, the problem still exists.
There is limited literature that examines why this discrepancy exists despite efforts to address the problem. This is because the underlying cause of inequitable treatment has not been adequately examined. In fact, it has in many instances, not even been recognized. Examining the use of exclusionary discipline through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) will provide an understanding of the cause of inequity and reveal the most effective approaches in addressing the issue.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine existing disparities in exclusionary school discipline within the district. Specifically, the focus was on the use of exclusionary discipline with Black students as compared to White students. The participants included district leaders as well as classroom teachers and building administrators currently serving in grades kindergarten-12 in buildings with 6% or more Black student enrollment (The district, 2020). The study’s concern was not only to document existing disparities, but additionally to identify contributing factors.

The study provided examples of disciplinary measures and the uses of these measures with White and Black students. Both the choice of disciplinary action and the frequency was studied. Finally, the overriding purpose was to determine what contributing factors, both on the part of the individual educators, and the district as a whole have led to an environment where Black students may receive exclusionary discipline significantly more often than their White counterparts.

The Research Questions Guiding this Study

There were four research questions guiding this study. The first was, “According to the district administrator and educators, what disparities exist in
exclusionary discipline in the district between Black and White students?” The answers to this question provided an assessment of current status and a vision for potential future growth and improvements. The second question was, “According to the district administrators and educators, how do the policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and white students in the district?” Documents were obtained and analyzed regarding student discipline coupled with qualitative input from educators.

The third research question was, “According to the district administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students in the district?” The fourth question was, “According to the district administrators and educators, in what ways can the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline be reduced between Black and White students in the district?” This analysis was a mixed methods study that included stories and data. The answers to these questions will shape future decisions and actions.

The Conceptual Framework

The study employed a mixed methods research analysis as seen through the lens of CRT (Mertens, 2020). It is essential to understand the meaning and implications of CRT. George (2021) defines CRT: “It critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tier” (p. 1).

While there is not unanimous agreement on what constitutes CRT, there are tenets with which scholars would agree. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identified first that racism is a pervasive and ordinary occurrence. They observed, “racism is ordinary…the
usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (p. 8). This is in part because racism is not addressed because it is not acknowledged. There is a perception of equality in social settings because the same rules apply to everyone regardless of racial background (Dattel, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021).

The perception that having the same rules eliminates inequities which in turn eliminates racial biases. Another theme of CRT is that the concepts of race and races are, “not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). The concept of significant racial differences and of races in general is based on very superficial factors. “People with common origins share certain physical traits, of course, such as skin color, physique, and hair texture. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). People have a great deal in common and those deviations have little to do with distinctly human characteristics such as personality, mental capacity, and moral character.

CRT does not identify racism solely as an intentional act of discrimination or an action that belittles people of color (Dattel, 2017). While these are examples of racism, CRT contends much racial inequity is unintended (Dattel, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021). “It exposes the ways that racism is often cloaked in terminology regarding mainstream, normal, or traditional values or neutral policies, principals, or practices” (George, 2021, p. 2). This exists in all facets of society, including education. “CRT observes that scholarship that ignores race is not demonstrating neutrality but adherence to the existing racial hierarchy” (George, 2021, p. 2). The use of CRT in an
approach to research and analysis reveals problems in current educational practices (Dattel, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These issues include discipline policies that disproportionately impact students of color (Dattel, 2017; George, 2021).

**Design of the Study**

This mixed methods study consisted of a concurrent qualitative and quantitative research approach (Mertens, 2020). A mixed methods study is an approach to research in the social, behavioral, and health sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative, or closed-ended, and qualitative, or open-ended data. The researcher then integrated the two and drew interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems (Creswell, 2015). The data was then triangulated (Mertens, 2020).

The researcher included an examination and analysis of the district data regarding discipline. The district policies outlined those infractions that may have led to exclusionary discipline (The district, 2021). The information gathered allowed for the examination of the frequency of disciplinary actions as they related to the racial background of the students, specifically Black students in comparison to White students. In addition, an examination of the district policies and procedures combined with conversations with district leaders and observations of educators produced an understanding that led to identifying problems and shortcomings as well as capitalizing on strengths and successes. Using these methods, the researcher examined areas where change is warranted (Mertens, 2020).
Setting

The individuals who participated in the study were serving in schools with 6% or more, Black student enrollment. In the district there are several schools in which the student enrollment is so small as to not provide sufficient data to contribute to the findings. Those schools with at least 6% Black student enrollment provided an accurate assessment of variations of treatment including incidents of disciplinary actions. Contact was made by the Analytics, Accountability, and Assessment (AAA) department through the district communication channels and in the participants’ assigned buildings.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with three district and 10 building leaders. Surveys were completed by 102 teachers and eight teachers participated in two focus groups. All educators were certified classroom teachers from the buildings that met the criteria of Black student enrollment. Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) (2020) states, “Some studies begin with researchers recruiting participants to the study and then selecting participants from the pool that responds” (p. 100). In this study participants were selected using this method. The selection of these participants was consistent with Seidman’s statement that participants chosen should have experience appropriate for the study (Seidman, 2019).

Data Collection Tools

The participants in interviews, focus groups, and surveys were extended an email invitation to be a part of this study (See Appendix A). The invitation described the nature and purpose of the study. It also assured potential participants of confidentiality (Mertens, 2020). Those who agreed to participate received an informed consent document (See
Appendix B). The consent agreement included a statement regarding events, provisions, and possibilities that could have occurred throughout the study (Mertens, 2020). These included: research purpose, duration, possible risks, method for obtaining information, statement regarding absence of compensation, name of person and means of contact for questions and additional information, and statement affirming that participation is strictly voluntary (Mertens, 2020). Consistent with APA (2020) guidelines, participants are not included in the references.

The study examined the use of exclusionary discipline over a period of three years to determine if there has been a change in its use. Data was collected and artifacts related to the topic of school discipline were obtained. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out the advantage to using documents as a source of data due to their stability and objectivity. The artifacts used included data documents obtained from the district, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE), the most recent United States census data available, the district handbook, and articles relating to the topic.

The interviews addressed all four research questions and were designed to identify the lived experiences of the participating administrators. “The focus on lived experience accessed through language provides the rationale for taking seriously the words our participants use and following up on them when appropriate” (Seidman, 2019, p.19). These “person-to-person interviews” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108) took place in school buildings or district offices via Zoom or answers to the interview questions were provided by the building principals in written form and sent to the researcher via email. Interviews were conducted with three the district executive leaders and ten building principals. The person-to-person interviews lasted no longer than one hour, were
audio recorded to ensure accuracy, and were retained according to The University of Missouri (MU) research policies.

There were also two focus groups, one secondary group comprised of three teachers and one elementary group comprised of five teachers from throughout the district. Each focus group session was 60 minutes. The purpose of the focus groups was to “uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior, or motivation” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 21). In this research the responses helped determine the behaviors that prompt teachers to use exclusionary discipline and why there is a discrepancy in the racial background of these students. The questions posed to the focus groups were clearly stated, short inquiries. They were open-ended to facilitate responses that required thought and illustration. The focus group discussion addressed all four research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

In addition, a survey was designed and sent to teachers serving in the participating schools. The Likert items addressed each of the four research questions. There were 102 responses. The results were recorded and presented using descriptive statistics which, “provide simple summaries about the sample and the responses to some or all of the questions” (Fink, 2017, p. 137). This analysis also incorporated a frequency computation which included the number of similar responses given to each item (Fink, 2017). The items and responses to the surveys were recorded using a Likert scale.

The participants, 60 elementary teachers and 41 secondary teachers and one who did not indicate, identified if they strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement (See Appendix C). The survey was emailed via the AAA department to all education personnel in the selected building sites
using Qualtrics. According to Arlene Fink (2017), “Survey data are used by program planners, evaluators, administrators, managers, researchers, marketers, and policy leaders in diverse fields, including business, health, education, social welfare, and politics. They are used because they get information directly from people” (p.1). Mertens (2020) identified the strengths of using technologically delivered surveys. Fink referenced cost effectiveness, quicker response rate, convenience for the participant, and automated collection, scoring, and reporting of the data (2017).

**Data Analysis**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the goal of data analysis by stating, “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of data…it is the process of making meaning” (p. 202). Data was collected via artifact and data analysis, recorded interviews and focus groups transcribed using Otter ai., and field notes from focus groups. This section described the process for analyzing the data collected. (See Figure 1)

The researcher used an interview protocol tool (See Appendix D) and a focus group protocol tool (See Appendix E). Following Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) recommendation, the researcher first focused on using open coding to develop categories for analysis of the data. The researcher then transitioned to focused coding where commonalities and differences were identified in order to condense the number of categories or codes. New data was juxtaposed with existing data for comparison and to secure a complete analysis. This process led to the development of specific themes for the study. The researcher then received permission to identify the district while reporting the data findings (See Appendix F).
**Research Questions**

| RQ 1: According to the district administrators and educators, what disparities exist in exclusionary discipline in the district between Black and White students? |
| RQ 2: According to the district administrators and educators, how do the policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and white students in the district? |
| RQ 3: According to the district administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students in the district? |
| RQ 4: According to the district administrators and educators, in what ways can the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline be reduced between Black and White students in the district? |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Descriptors</th>
<th>RQ1</th>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th>RQ3</th>
<th>RQ4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School discipline data</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview questions (Appendix D)**

1. Describe the students who have received exclusionary discipline. X X
1.a. Racial or Ethnic group X X
1.b. Gender X
1.c. Socio-economic status X
1.d. Academic background X X
1.e. Social emotional status X
2. Describe situations that resulted in exclusionary discipline. X X X X
3. What specific actions lead to the discipline? X X X
3.a. What impact did this have on the teacher? X X
3.b. Other in students in the class? X X
3.c. The classroom instruction? X X
3.d. The teacher’s relationship with the student? X X
4. What happens when a student returns to class after the discipline? X X X
5. How does suspension impact the learning of the students in the classroom? …the student receiving the discipline? X X X X
6. Describe factors that you believe influence the tendency to refer a student for discipline. X X X X
6.a. Sped. versus regular education? X X X X
6.b. Student background/homelife? X X
7. What is your overall opinion of exclusionary discipline? X
8. What alternatives exist for exclusionary discipline? X

**Focus Group Questions (Appendix E)**
1. Describe your current role.

2. Tell us about exclusionary disciplinary at your school.  

3. Describe the students who typically receive exclusionary discipline in your school.

| 3.a. Racial or Ethnic group | X | X | X |

| 3.b. Gender or Gender identity | X | X | X |

| 3.c. Socio-economic status | X | X | X |

| 3.d. Academic background | X | X | X |

| 3.e. Social Emotional status | X | X | X |

4. Describe a situation with your students that resulted in exclusionary discipline.

“Keep your experiences in mind as we discuss the next questions”

5. What impact did this have on you personally?  

6. What impact did this have on other students in the class?  

7. What impact did this have on instruction?  

8. What impact did this have on your/the faculty member’s relationship with the student?  

9. What impact did this have on the learning of the student who received exclusionary discipline?  

10. What changed behaviors, if any, did you observe in the student who received exclusionary discipline when they returned to school?  

11. What is your overall perspective on exclusionary discipline?  

| Survey Items (Appendix C) |

| 1. Educational opportunities are equitable for all students in our school. | X | X | X | X |

| 2. Opportunities in extracurricular-activities are equally accessible to all students with appropriate interests and abilities. | X | X | X |

| 3. All students have access to counseling as needed. | X | X | X |

| 4. Students with special needs are given attention as needed. | X | X | X |

| 5. Student discipline is applied equitably. | X | X | X |

| 6. Some student behavioral infractions should lead to automatic exclusionary discipline. | X | X |

| 7. Girls and boys receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency. | X |

| 8. Younger students and older students receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency. | X |

| 9. Black and White students receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency. | X | X |

| 10. Black students receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) more frequently than White students. | X | X |

| 11. Students from all socio-economic backgrounds receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency. | X | X |

| 12. Exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) should be a last resort after other corrective action has been attempted. | X | X |

Note. Information in Figure 1 developed by researcher.
The quantitative data was presented through descriptive statistics. These are, “statistics whose function is to describe or indicate several characteristics common to the entire sample” (Mertens, 2020, p. 443). School districts throughout the nation reported the instances of student behavioral infractions and the disciplinary consequences which followed. The district is no exception. The data in question is annually produced. The researcher used the district data in reference to research question one. These statistics were analyzed identifying the number of students by racial group receiving exclusionary discipline, the mean and median numbers by school building, and the percentage of students receiving exclusionary discipline by racial group.

**Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls**

It is important that a researcher is forthcoming about all potentially qualifying information. The researcher included personal information. The researcher also included a description of the settings where the research took place.

**Positionality**

To identify the potential for biases and related issues, it is prudent to share background information regarding the researcher. The researcher is a White woman of Northern European ancestry. As a child and young adult, the researcher and her family lived in three communities in Missouri. The researcher’s parents were both college-educated professionals. She has one sibling, an older brother. In other words, the researcher is an almost stereotypical White, middle-class, Midwesterner.

She is a graduate of two major universities and has earned a Bachelor of Science in Education, Master of Science in Education, and Specialist in Education Administration degrees. She also holds a certification for pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in
Educational Leadership and Administration. She currently serves in the School Community Liaison - Assistant Principal role in a large elementary school with a student population of 85% free and reduced school lunch rate. The researcher has served in this same school district for more than 20 years as both a teacher and as an administrator.

The researcher conducted her study within her current school district. This might have led to confirmation bias (Mertens, 2020). “Human beings naturally seek information that confirms our beliefs and filter out contradicting information (Mertens, 2020, p. 271). Mertens (2020) continued by stating, “Researchers need to be aware of this tendency and to be open to viewpoints with which they disagree or have not had personal experience” (p. 271). While researching, analyzing, and drawing conclusions, the researcher used bracketing to minimize any biases caused by previous experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Moustakas (1994), this process is also called Epoche, “A Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment. … In the Epoche the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings (sic) are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited” (p. 33). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, “These prejudices and assumptions are then bracketed or temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself” (p. 27).

**Ethical Practices**

To ensure ethical practices the research was submitted to the University of Missouri (MU) IRB and the district IRB. The purpose of an IRB is to, “ensure that researchers follow the maxim that should govern research as it does medicine: *Do no harm*” (Booth et. al, 2016, p. 84). This is especially relevant when a researcher is gaining information from people through interviews, surveys, or any other form of data collection or observation.
Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the researcher followed the guidelines stated by Booth et al. (2016, p. 272) in identifying standards for trustworthy research practices.

- They do not plagiarize or claim credit for the results of others.
- They do not misreport sources, invent data, or fake results.
- They do not submit data whose accuracy they don’t trust, unless they say so.
- They do not conceal objections that they cannot rebut.
- They do not caricature or distort opposing views.
- They do not destroy data or conceal sources important for those who follow.

The researcher ensured the validity and reliability of the information contained in the project through rigorous research which guaranteed the accuracy of any quoted materials and all data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). She used peer reviewed, current or timely dated, reputable, and authoritative artifacts (Mertens, 2020). The study participants were reputable members of the educational community and conducted themselves in a professional manner.

The researcher employed triangulation in data analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe triangulation as, “Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives (p. 245). “Triangulation…involves the use of multiple methods and multiple data sources to support the strength of interpretations and conclusions” (Mertens, 2020, p. 466). When comparing the data, triangulation made conclusions more reliable (Mertens, 2020). Tracy (2010) stated, “Multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints…and methods of analysis
allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re) interpretation” (p. 843).

Confidentiality

This study ensured strict confidentiality of all participants and their responses. This included statements made in interviews, focus groups, and on surveys. These findings, as well as district data, were utilized to draw conclusions. “Original records such as contact information sheets, informed consent documents, and audio recordings must be held securely to guard against the identity of participants being accidently revealed” (Seidman, 2019, p. 74).

Transferability

Numerous school districts may find this study useful in recognizing equity issues in their own setting and developing equity audits and policy to address these issues. This is especially true in districts whose demographic picture is similar to the district. However, even if the district is of a different size and racial/ethnic makeup, the findings identified in this study can provide an impetus for self-assessment and new policy implementation.

Definitions of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study the terms discipline or exclusionary discipline refer to those actions that lead to a student being separated from their class through either in-school-suspension (ISS) or out-of-school-suspension (OSS). ISS is when a student is isolated in the school building while being supervised by a staff member. OSS is when a student is suspended from school for a short period of time. Expulsion is when a student is excluded from school for an extended period of time. There is a disparity between
marginalized and non-marginalized groups (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). The marginalized groups will include students of color, English language learners (ELL), students from low-income families, students with individualized education plans (IEP), and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and other nontraditional roles and practices (LGBTQ+) (The district, 2020). For purposes of this study the term equity refers to treatment that is not only the same as that given to others, but also endeavors to consider marginalized status, disadvantage, and cultural norms that are not consistent with the usual societal patterns and practices of non-marginalized persons.

**Significance of the Study**

The importance of this study was to recognize the disparities in disciplinary practices between Black and White students that exist in the district. It was also important to determine the root causes. This study assisted in the goal “for teachers and administrators to have a more productive orientation, one that is not deficit based or focused on issues external to schools” (Skrla et al., 2004, p. 141). With completion of the study, the district has an analysis of the current equity status. This includes current analysis which leads to an understanding of the gaps in disciplinary equity. The study provides the information necessary for individuals administering schools or developing school policy to have a foundation to recognize racial disparities especially as they relate to disciplinary practices. The administrative personnel should also have a clearer perception of the opinions and responses of faculty. This should lead to better preparation and design for future training experiences and district policy.

**Summary of Study**

The study provided an analysis of the underlying causes of inequitable exclusionary disciplinary treatment of students based on race. This problem was
especially evident in an examination of the frequency of incidents resulting in exclusionary discipline experienced by Black students. This study additionally revealed that disciplinary disparities have been identified nationwide. It confirmed that when inequities exist in the treatment of students, especially in the use of disciplinary consequences, that negative outcomes may result. Furthermore, it demonstrated how these inequities can occur unintentionally and with no overt malice involved.

This study then focused on the district and the statistics the district has compiled. It revealed the propensity of inequitable treatment found throughout the country is also evident in the district. A specific analysis of the disparities identified the extent of the problem, offered the opinions and reactions of personnel, and provided an understanding of how well personnel recognized the existence of disciplinary inequities. The feedback came from classroom teachers, building administrators, and district administrative personnel.

This study identified current measures being taken by the district, juxtaposed with the current data. It identified suggestions for immediate action and longer-term changes. The study is useful for the district as a baseline from which to measure progress and provides the impetus for studies at other districts.
Section Two

Practitioner Context for the Study
Background of the Context

Interest in and the establishment of public education began in Missouri prior to it becoming a state. Early settlers brought with them an appreciation of the importance of formal education, and were willing from the first settlements to provide a publicly funded education for Missouri’s children (SPS High-Ranking District Administrator, 2021).

Early District History

The Springfield Public School District (SPS) has been serving the children of this city and surrounding area for nearly 150 years. As the district grew it consolidated with surrounding schools. One such school, Sunshine Elementary, was founded in 1864 and has been in continual operation since (SPS High-Ranking District Administrator, 2021). It is accurate, therefore, to state, SPS, including its component parts, has been educating children for more than 155 years.

The first building constructed as a school was built in 1831 less than two years after the first home built by a person of European descent was constructed in early 1830. In 1832 it was replaced by a more permanent structure located on what is now College Street. (Fairbanks & Tuck, 1914). This early inclusion of schools in the community development of Springfield indicates the importance early settlers placed on the education of their children (Fairbanks & Tuck, 1914).

These schools, and those that followed until the civil war, were “pay schools” with each charging a fee, or tuition, for attendance (Fairbanks & Tuck, 1914). The first publicly supported school was established in 1867. In that year a Board of Education was elected, tax levy set, buildings rented and on September 9, 1867 the high school opened with 68 students, as well as an elementary school for White students with 204 students,
and the school for Black students with an enrollment of 48. To teach these 320 pupils, seven individuals were employed providing a student to teacher ratio of 48:1 (Fairbanks & Tuck, 1914).

**History of Education for Black Children in the District**

There followed a significant growth in the city’s population and the number of students in the schools as well. Cities, plural, is accurate because until 1885 there were two towns, North Springfield and Springfield, each with its own schools. After the voters chose to unify the towns under the name Springfield, there were 945 students enrolled in the public schools. Thirteen teachers and the Superintendent employed by the North Springfield district were absorbed into the Springfield public schools district. Growth continued throughout the latter 19th and early 20th centuries and by the 1914-1915 school year there were 20 buildings in the district and it employed 200 educators (Fairbanks & Tuck, 1914).

The steady growth caused ever increasing changes in the school’s properties and faculty by the mid-twentieth century. Significant in this expansion was Lincoln School which served Springfield’s Black students. It was one of 4,998 schools for African-American children built throughout the South and financed through a funnel established by Julian Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck and Co. This fund, named for Rosenwald, established the foundation for the “Rosenwald Schools” and transformed education for a significant part of American Society (OTC, 2021). The Lincoln school is now a part of Ozarks Technical Community College, and is known as Lincoln Hall. In the 1950’s through the Brown v. The Board of Education decision, school integration became law in Missouri, and although some districts did not truly integrate for some time following, the
Springfield schools integrated in 1955. Lincoln High School remained open that year so the seniors of the class of 1955 could graduate from Lincoln if they chose to or could transfer to Springfield, later Central, High School. After 1955 Lincoln became a junior high school and later part of the Graff Vocational-Technical School (OTC, 2021).

A key observation is that SPS accepted, and even embraced, the responsibility of educating its Black students. When desegregation came through the United States Supreme Court decision and mandate that followed, SPS, unlike several Missouri school districts, quickly implemented integration (OTC, 2021). By recognizing that these children were going to confront new social experiences and new learning environments, SPS demonstrated a sensitivity to the students’ unique needs. This indicates SPS was willing to actively pursue this new development in public education.

**Current District Status**

Another landmark event was the establishment of a second senior high school. Parkview opened in 1956, signaling a move toward urbanization for SPS. Currently, SPS includes 35 elementary schools, an intermediate school, nine middle schools, and five high schools (SPS, 2021). Additionally, there is a center for gifted education, and four early childhood centers. The district also offers twelve choice programs including Academy of Exploration, Academy of Fine and Performing Arts, Wonders of the Ozarks Learning Facility, and Health Sciences Academy (SPS, 2021). Again, SPS demonstrated a commitment to provide opportunities for all its students with innovative and nontraditional programs and approaches.
District Leadership Structure

The district includes approximately 24,500 students and 4,000 full-time employees. The racial and ethnic makeup of the district’s student population very closely reflects the community, with over 75% of the students identified as White and just under 25% as another racial and/or ethnic background. This latter group includes Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and people with mixed racial heritage. A description of the district follows and includes the district administration, its faculty, the support staff, and the students (SPS, 2021).

The administrative team at SPS includes 12 individuals who have specific responsibilities, but also work collaboratively. This group is headed by the Superintendent whose tenure with SPS began on July 1, 2021. The Superintendent has endorsed the district’s long-standing vision of providing school/community partnerships in order to focus on “every learner, every day” is reflected in the district’s daily operations (SPS High Ranking District Administrator, 2019). Directly below the Superintendent in the organizational chart are two deputy superintendents. The individuals are the Deputy Superintendent of Operations and the Deputy Superintendent of Academics.

These superintendents are supported by the Chief Human Resources Officer, the Chief Communications Officer, and the Chief Equity and Diversity Officer (SPS, 2021). There are also five executive directors who are responsible for specific areas within the SPS structure. These begin with the Executive Director of Elementary Learning and the Executive Director of Secondary Learning. The executive director leadership team also
includes the Executive Director of Innovation and Information, the Executive Director of Student and School Services, and the Executive Director of Operations (SPS, 2021).

Respect for, and commitment to, the value of professional educators is found throughout SPS literature. The teachers in the system are seen as the essential lynchpin in the district’s success. When compared with area school districts, SPS, is tied for the highest percentage of teachers who are master’s degree prepared and are second in average teacher salaries, although salaries throughout the area are very similar. The average years of experience for SPS faculty remains high compared to statewide counterparts and the percentage of educators with master’s degrees is only slightly below the two leading districts, Columbia and Independence (dese.mo.gov, 2021).

Another critical group in the SPS system are the support staff. The support services are coordinated by a team of specialists working in concert. In their mission statement the learning support team states, “Our goal as a team is to empower and equip educators to efficiently engage and challenge all students by providing effective curriculum resources, professional learning and support of relevant adopted materials and best practices” (SPS, 2021).

This effort is coordinated by 15 administrative staff under the direction of the Director of Learning Support. This group includes a variety of specialties; P.E./ Health and Engagement, Libraries, Numeracy, Secondary Literacy, Social Studies, Science, Fine Arts, World Languages, Literacy Intervention, Instructional Support, and College and Career Readiness. This battery of support services and the personnel who work in these areas offer significant support to the classroom teachers and building administrators (SPS, 2021).
District Priorities

The students are naturally the primary focus of the district. As noted earlier, over 75% of the 24,500 students at SPS are White, with the remaining 25% comprised of a mix of racial and ethnic groups. Black students represent the largest of these groups with 8% of the total SPS population. Over half of SPS students (54.4%) are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program, which indicates the presence of a significant low-income population among families with school-age children (SPS, 2021).

The district functions with a conscious effort at creating financial sustainability, elimination of barriers, utilization of 21st Century tools and schools, empowering and engaging partners, and ending isolation and fostering regional collaborations (SPS High Ranking District Administrator, 2019). To that end, the district successfully passed a bond increase which has led to stabilizing the SPS financial position and constructing and renovating schools which are consistent with current best practices for educational environments and student safety. Moreover, efforts have been made to involve area businesses and organizations in support of activities. SPS has historically enjoyed considerable community support and this is a foundation for future and additional cooperation. By passing the bond increase, SPS has expedited the development of business and community interest and action.

SPS has been recognized as a successful and innovative district. As such, SPS is a willing partner in regional conversations. SPS is a large participant in the Greater Ozarks Cooperating School Districts (GOCSD) organization. GOCSD exists to serve member districts by promoting collaboration of resources to ensure educational opportunities are maximized (greaterozarkscsd.org, 2021). The district has implemented and encouraged
growth in the SPS organization in individuals throughout the district. The leadership has developed a structure that capitalizes on the strengths of administrative personnel and then requires those people to work in coordinated effort. It also has placed a premium on capable staff and finding avenues for staff development (SPS High-Ranking District Administrator, 2021).

A large school district must have able leaders at every level of administration and throughout every school building. It is unlikely even the strongest individual could successfully lead a large district relying on his/her skills alone (Marzano et al., 2014). Its approach includes consideration of individual advancement, an inspirational leader capable of motivating subordinates and a person who provides intellectual and professional stimulation. The leadership of SPS successfully has met, and continues to meet, these criteria. (see Figure 2)

District Mission

The district's mission is to “prepare all students for tomorrow by providing engaging, relevant, and personalized educational experiences today” (SPS, 2021). Additionally, the district maintains a vision of serving “as a catalyst for lifelong learning, equipping students for their futures” (SPS, 2021). To accomplish these goals the district has also pledged eight commitments to their students, the patrons of the district, and the Springfield community. These commitments support the belief that all individuals have potential and the commitments made by the district will ensure the realization of that potential. Those commitments are to:

- Embrace the needs of the whole child
- Create, communicate, and demonstrate high expectations
● Inspire and instill a passion for learning
● Demonstrate flexibility, agility, and adaptability
● Foster a culture that supports and engages high quality teachers and leaders
● Cultivate community ownership
● Maintain a safe and secure learning environment
● Engage all staff to positively impact student success.

Realizing these commitments is achieved through five focus areas. Within each area are a series of strategies which combine to accomplish the focus area’s role in realizing the district commitments. Each focus area is frequently reviewed and updated (SPS, 2021).

**District Five Focus Areas**

The first focus area is student success and learning support. There are three goals within this area and each includes specific strategies. The first of these goals is to promote, create, and maintain a safe, secure learning environment that supports the physical and emotional well-being of all students. To accomplish this goal the “district will expand safety and security supports including staff training, threat identification, and security physical improvements. The district will also enhance cooperation with community resources, and research and implement improvements in student engagement, safety, and attendance” (SPS, 2021).
Figure 2

*Springfield Public Schools organizational Chart 2021-2022*

*Note.* Information in Figure 2 was retrieved from sps.org, 2021.
The second goal in focus area one is that each student will have equitable access to personalized learning which leads to academic and personal growth. To achieve this goal the district will take steps to increase participation in extracurricular and after school programming for students with an inclusive emphasis on those children from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. The district will experience annual growth and academic success, provide access to the most recent developments and learning tools and equipment, expand access to early childhood education, make certain students from underrepresented communities are included in the academic improvements the district experiences, and take steps to increase the graduation rate (SPS, 2021).

The third goal is that students will be able to solve problems through critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. To meet this goal, the district will involve community organizations and private businesses in an effort to expand rich learning potential for both students and staff personnel. Additionally, the district will provide experiences in addition to core academics designed to enhance students’ life skills and college and career readiness (SPS, 2021).

The second focus area is to have empowered and effective teachers, leaders, and support personnel. To accomplish this focus there are eight identified strategies. The district will increase and maintain support for new teachers, leaders, and staff throughout all levels of education. The district's professional expectations will be clearly identified. The district will enhance its recruitment efforts and capitalize on relationships with local universities. With these considerations in place, the district will recruit, hire, develop, support, and retain highly qualified personnel with individuals from diverse backgrounds included in the workforce at all levels. The district will also provide professional learning
experiences, opportunities for moving into leadership roles, and build the capacity to serve in leadership positions. The district will also provide competitive salary and benefit compensation and establish and maintain a positive working environment with a rewarding academic culture (SPS, 2021).

Focus area three is to maintain financial sustainability and operational efficiency. The strategies include allocating resources on a needs-based approach, maximizing economic efficiency, maintaining both internal and external accountability, and implementing the facility master plan and equipment plan which will ensure a prudent acquisition of new equipment and resources and to maintain district facilities at optimal levels (SPS, 2021).

Focus area four pledges excellence in communication and engagement. There are several strategies to accomplish this outcome. First, is to continually emphasize the importance for all staff to be aware of district goals and the policies designed to meet those goals. The district will also work with stakeholders to elicit their support for district aspiration and programs, continually evaluate the effectiveness of the internal communications with organization and to improve the district's efforts to communicate with the community to keep people informed of district policies, accomplishments, plans for future development, and to the district's desire to be transparent and forthcoming in all its decisions and activities. The final two strategies relating to focus area four also relate to public relations. They are to continually review, and when appropriate refresh, district public relations materials, including branding, to ensure consistency and create an individual identity for each school within the overall master brand. The district will also
strive to obtain feedback from students, parents, employees, stakeholders, and from throughout the community (SPS, 2021).

The final focus area is equity and diversity. This focus tasks the district to be ever mindful of the need to provide an equitable and diverse environment through hiring practices, staff training, enhancing academic supports and adopting culturally relevant curriculum. This will be accomplished by providing appropriate learning activities for staff, recognizing diversity in employment, and taking steps to enhance and diversify the workforce. The district will also expand programming designed to address needs of underserved populations, help students develop their personal identities, value their cultural backgrounds, and incorporate their lived experiences in all facets of their education. The district will also research and develop ways to foster greater community involvement (SPS, 2021).

One additional element in the SPS administrative structure is the leadership team structure. There are four types of leadership teams in the SPS approach. These four are the operations and instructional support leadership teams, the senior leadership team, the executive leadership team, and the cabinet. Each of these has specific duties and challenges (SPS, 2021). (see Figure 3)
The operations and instructional support leadership teams implement action plans at the departmental level. Each team monitors action plans as they relate to their department to ensure targets are met. The senior leadership team leads major departments or facilities. While focused on specific entities (departments or facilities), their team collaborates across functions to ensure smooth implementation of district strategies (High Ranking District Administrator, 2021).
The executive leadership team (ELT) is an internal body built to ensure clear and candid conversation among the district’s professional leadership. The ELT is comprised of the Superintendent, the Chief of Equity and Diversity, the Chief Communication Officer, the two Deputy Superintendents, the six Executive Directors, and the Chief Human Resources Officer who reports to the Deputy Superintendent of Operations. The ELT does not meet with the Board of Education. The Superintendent meets with the Board of Education and the Superintendent is the only individual the Board of Education directly supervises. The Superintendent can designate a representative to act on their behalf for certain duties or assignments.

The chiefs of equity and diversity, communication, and human resources can meet with the Board of Education, because this has been designated by the superintendent. Typically, the Superintendent meets with the Board of Education president or Vice President and meets with two Board of Education members at a time to avoid violating the sunshine law (High Ranking District Administrator, 2021). The cabinet is comprised of the Superintendent, the three Chief Administrators, the Chief Equity and Diversity Officer, Chief Communication Officer, the Chief Human Resources Officer, and the two deputy superintendents. These individuals are charged with oversight of the district, building both internal and external relationships, and developing and maintaining a positive rapport with the community (High Ranking District Administrator, 2021).

**Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting**

The experiences of SPS have been indicative of a district receptive to new ideas and focused on the best possible learning environments for its students. It is, therefore, concerning that disparities in disciplinary practices are prevalent and additional corrective
action is warranted. The structure is in place to take positive steps to address the current disparities. Moreover, SPS is not the only district to experience these issues (dese.mo.gov, 2021) and the experiences I have in SPS will be transferable to other districts.

It is advantageous that I am a tenured employee in SPS with several years of classroom teaching and administrative experience. This provided me with an understanding of the district as well as a position as a long-standing team member. This positionality as one of the team helped reduce any apprehension individuals might have had in contributing information and sharing their opinions. It also allowed me to know how to expeditiously access information and to ensure it is timely and accurate.

My career-long association with SPS afforded me credibility and allowed me to assure potential participants their input will be confidential and they will have prompt responses to any questions. This insider status will helped instill a sense of working cooperatively on behalf of the district and further encouraged teachers to participate. Moreover, the SPS leadership had no doubt I had the best interest of the district as a basis of my research. As I conducted research, they will benefit from the information I provide. The trust I have developed with the teachers throughout the district was also present in my relationship with district leadership. I had both positional and referential power. This positionality coupled with my role as an independent, academic researcher and a valued building administrator allowed me to conduct an objective and rigorous research project, which will then be confidently shared with SPS leadership (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Conclusion

Each of the administrative units and planning development activities at SPS is focused on providing the finest and most comprehensive education possible to the largest number of students. The district has a 93.6% graduation rate. It has Missouri’s only K-12 International Baccalaureate program and has recently invested over $168 million in improvement to the facilities. Finally, the district has a capable faculty with an average teaching experience of over 12 years and 63% have earned advanced degrees (SPS, 2021). This is all a product of the community that from its inception recognized the value of education and established and enriched public education beginning in 1867 and continues with the same commitment and enthusiasm today. It is, however, an unfortunate anomaly for the district to have an inequity in its disciplinary treatment of Black students and it presents a challenge for SPS to correct this problem and reinforce its tradition of caring for all the children of the community.
Section Three

Scholarly Context for the Study
Scholarly Context

Schools are multi-faceted places where learning, creativity, social interaction, expanding goals, and new and increasing opportunities all happen simultaneously. Public schools can level the playing field for students, providing them an opportunity for advancement and accomplishment regardless of other conditions and issues they are experiencing. These are the goals and aspirations of education, especially in public education.

The realization that elementary and secondary education should include opportunities in addition to traditional pedagogical activities is becoming more prevalent. “Practices to support students’ social and emotional learning are common in K-12 schools across the United States” (Hamilton & Doss, 2020, p. 1). A survey conducted in 2019 indicated a growing interest in adding social and emotional learning experiences to the elementary and secondary curriculum (Hamilton & Doss, 2020).

This positive picture of multiple learning experiences and life enrichment is called into question when it is also observed that the use of exclusionary discipline deprives students of these experiences which can have such a positive impact on their lives. Some argue, exclusionary discipline is an effective, or at least necessary, response to student misbehavior. Bock et al. (1998) took issue with this position, “On the surface, suspension or expulsion might seem like a reasonable form of punishment; however, problems range from recidivism and having a detrimental effect on academics to increasing the number of dropouts, cultural bias, and indiscriminate use” (p. 51). These negative effects are underscored when teachers and administrators rely on a reactive, punitive role in addressing inappropriate behaviors (Bock et al., 1998).
Public Schools

Morrison and Vaandering (2012) advocated using a restorative justice approach to addressing behavioral issues at all levels of public education. They defined this concept as, “Restorative justice is best understood as a distinct praxis for sustaining safe and just school communities” (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, p. 139). The theory is that all human beings, including children, respond more effectively through social engagement than just through traditional school practices. However, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) also observed the typical school environment does not imply this approach. “Traditionally, institutions maintain their power base by investigating what law and/or code of conduct has been broken, who did it, and what punishment is deserved” (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, p. 140).

The recourse often employed was exclusionary discipline. For the purposes of this study exclusionary discipline refers to in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), or expulsion from school. There exists documented evidence of long-standing use of exclusionary discipline. Four decades of additional research called into question its effectiveness (Fenning et al., 2012). These authors also observed that while written restrictive codes of conduct were present in American educational institutions for nearly a century, recent trends have been for those requirements to become more restrictive, punitive, and inflexible (Fenning et al., 2012).

Several researchers have identified issues with exclusionary discipline. Ritter and Anderson (2018) observed, “Much discussion in the United States education community centers around the use of exclusionary discipline (out-of-school suspensions – OSS – and expulsions) in public schools” (p. 161). They also stated, “Concerns about exclusionary
discipline are warranted” (p. 161). This sentiment was also shared by Sharkey and Fenning (2012). They observed, “Long-standing research consistently documents the negative impact of suspension as a disciplinary tactic” (p. 96). Sharkey and Fenning (2012) further shared, “Suspension is not effective in extinguishing challenging behavior or teaching proactive alternatives” (p. 96).

Inequitable Use of Exclusionary Discipline for Multiple Marginalized Groups

The practice becomes even more problematic when one realizes exclusionary discipline is disproportionately utilized. Students with disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline than are their classmates (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; Losen et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014; Whitford et al., 2018). Morgan et al. (2014), while providing an overview of discipline which removes students from the classroom, observed a disproportionately large percentage are persons of color, students with disabilities, and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning.

While inequitable treatment is most pronounced with Black students, there are other groups who experience excessive use of exclusionary discipline. These include students with racial, language, and physical characteristics. In these articles, researchers have focused on groups of students or segments of the population in addition to or other than Black students (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; Whitford et al., 2018).

An extensive research project, which included all schools in all districts throughout the nation, was undertaken by Whitford et al (2018). They identified the percentage of students in each state who were English learning and compared that figure with the percentage of students who had received either an in-school suspension, a single
instance of out-of-school suspension, multiple out-of-school suspensions, and/or expulsions. The researchers found in 13 states instances of use of exclusionary discipline significantly exceeded the English learner’s percentage of the overall school enrollment in at least one category.

Within the 13 states there was a wide variance. Rhode Island and Hawaii where the only excessive result was in those students who were expelled, to Colorado whose English learner students were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline in all four categories. The states in which the exclusionary discipline exceeded the percentage of English learners in the state's student population as a whole were Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Utah (Whitford et al., 2018).

Another sizable research effort was undertaken by Sullivan et al. (2014). The study provided research which included 2,750 students from 39 schools in the Midwest to determine if students with disabilities were more likely to receive exclusionary discipline than students who were not disabled. The study produced two significant findings. Students with disabilities who are most frequently suspended are those whose disability falls into a category that the Individuals with Disabilities Act classifies as emotional disturbance. Also, students with this particular diagnosis are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline regardless of their ethnic, racial, and economic characteristics.

The incidents of exclusionary discipline among Hispanic and American Indian students was examined by Brown and Di Tillio (2013). The results of studies which indicated a disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with Black students was used as a catalyst to determine if similar circumstances exist within other ethnic minority
groups. The study was focused exclusively on the state of Arizona where significant numbers of Hispanics and American Indians reside.

Gage et al., (2019) used the extensive data available which confirms the discriminatory use of exclusionary discipline directed at Black children and specifically applied it to Black students with disabilities. The study indicated students with disabilities receive exclusionary discipline at a rate more than double that of White students with disabilities. The rate of exclusionary discipline for Black students with disabilities was also higher than that of Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students with disabilities.

The statistical analysis regarding racial disparity in school discipline as related to Black females was examined by Annamna et al., (2019). The focus was on exclusionary discipline. The difference treatment on a racial basis was examined. There were two unique observations in this article. The first was that Black girls were often not researched as separate from Black boys even though their experiences were not identical. There were some similarities in that White educators are alleged to see Black boys and Black girls as more aggressive than their White counterparts. The second was that Black boys were most often disciplined after an act of disobedience, whereas Black girls were most often disciplined due to perception of what they may have done or were about to do, rather than after an act of disobedience.

The Pacific Northwest was the setting for research on exclusionary discipline conducted by Vincent et al. (2012). There was an indication of greater prevalence of exclusionary discipline for Black and Hispanic students. They also found that American
Indian and Alaska native students who had a disability were more likely to be placed in alternative educational environments than other students with disabilities.

Even decades old research provided background information regarding the increase in suspensions and expulsions (Morrison & D’Incan, 1997). Focusing on statistics generated in both the United States and Great Britain, the researchers were able to correlate “zero tolerance” policies with suspensions and expulsions. The contention is that due to the rigid policy, students who have a variety of issues are given exclusionary discipline when a more lenient approach would have resulted in more favorable results.

**Inequitable Use of Exclusionary Discipline Between Black and White Students**

As noted in the previous sections, inequitable application of discipline policies has been documented amongst many different student populations. But, the most pronounced discrepancy in the use of exclusionary discipline was between Black and White students. Martin et al. (2016) identified that the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline for Black children began at the earliest level in education. Data indicate that while Black children comprised only 18% of the nation's pre-K students, they represented 48% of the pre-K students who had experienced multiple suspensions. This pattern continued throughout the educational experience. Moreover, there was a direct relationship between suspensions and academic performance.

The issues surrounding these circumstances called into question the sensitivity of White teachers as they related to their Black students. White teachers were encouraged to disregard race when interacting with Black students. This was presented as an attempt to be equal. However, this approach avoided the realities of the cultural traditions of Black people in America. There was also a tendency to see Black students as more inclined to
have aggressive behavior. These differences were further exacerbated by the language and pronunciation differences that frequently existed between Black and White individuals (Martin et al., 2016).

Butler et al. (2012) identified a disproportionate use of discipline among students of color. They found African American, Hispanic, and Native American students received a disproportionate amount of the exclusionary discipline assigned in the schools in the study. These data indicated Black students, specifically males, were most frequently subject to disciplinary actions.

Disproportionate use of exclusionary disciplinary consequences with Black students was also identified by Copolan and Nelson (2019). Their analysis of data obtained from the Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, revealed 5% of White boys and 2% of White girls received exclusionary discipline on a nationwide basis. By comparison the rate for Black children is 18% for boys and 10% for girls.

Using this information as a starting point, the authors then examined the data for the state of Indiana. They found that not only does inequitable treatment exist in Indiana, but that the inequalities were pervasive at all grade-levels, from preschool forward. More than 5% of Black students in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes had exclusionary discipline, while only 1% of their White counterparts experienced suspension or expulsion. By the time these children reached high school, 34% of Black students had been suspended or expelled, as opposed to 13% of White students (Copolan & Nelson, 2019).

An examination of disciplinary reform from a teacher’s perspective was undertaken by Griffith and Tyner (2019). Their data revealed educators have strong
opinions on school discipline and were often critical of the discipline practices in their own schools. The primary complaint of the teachers was inconsistency.

The majority of the participating teachers said they support Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice, but also felt suspensions were sometimes necessary. Teachers also said the recent reports of fewer incidents of using exclusionary discipline indicated increased tolerance for violation of rules in policies rather than improved student behavior (Griffith & Tyner, 2019). Of particular note, Black teachers stated that while they felt exclusionary discipline was often used with a racial bias, they still advocated increasing its use.

Anderson and Ritter (2017) confirmed the findings of previous studies demonstrating that Black students were more likely to receive exclusionary discipline than White students. Their specific analysis addresses the state of Arkansas. These data revealed Black students statewide were more likely to receive exclusionary discipline, but not necessarily within an individual school. Other data points, including family income level, were also prominent characteristics that became evident in analyzing correlating factors in the use of exclusionary discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2017).

They also indicted the use of exclusionary discipline in general. They observed that zero tolerance laws did not impact the frequency of misbehaviors. In fact, they contended that higher incidence of exclusionary discipline usually predicted higher rather than lower rates of inappropriate behavior (Anderson & Ritter, 2017).

The experiences of four Black students who were convinced that their racial background was directly related to their suspensions was reported by Haight et al. (2016). The students included a 12-year-old seventh grade girl, a 14-year-old eighth grade boy,
another 14-year-old eighth grade boy, and a 16-year-old 11th grade boy. While the individual circumstances varied, in each case the students felt they were treated unfairly. Moreover, there was reason to believe that their discipline may have been different if they had not been Black.

They examined the intersection of race with cultural differences experienced by Black students as opposed to their counterparts from other racial backgrounds. Additionally, there was a review of literature regarding race and disability, race and gender, and race and income. The authors also offered insight into the potential for reducing racial disproportionality in school suspensions and reducing suspensions as a whole (Haigh et al., 2016).

Bal et al. (2019) provided another article in which they identified a discrepancy in treatment between Black and White students in the practice of removing students from typical learning environments and placing them in special circumstances. The study was conducted in Wisconsin where there was a pronounced disparity in the use of exclusionary discipline between Black and White students and also between Black students and their Latino and Native American counterparts. The article included an examination of the differences in disciplinary action given to children of various racial backgrounds. Black children were more likely to be punished than their classmates. The authors stated the most significant barrier to addressing the problem was the lack of cultural awareness on the part of educational and civic leaders (Bal et al., 2019).

Losen et al., (2015) were explicit in identifying the negative aspects of school suspension. They discussed the time spent away from the classroom, racial inequities, and the loss of positive relationship between teacher and student. They also identified
suspension based on academic level (elementary, secondary) and by state. They provided a comparison of the racial disparity by state at elementary and secondary level and identified districts where overall suspensions were most frequent. Interestingly the disparity between Black and White suspensions at the elementary level was greatest in Missouri, and of the 10 school districts with the highest rate of suspension for elementary students nationwide three were in Missouri (Normandy, Riverview Gardens, and St. Louis). The top seven suspending districts nationwide were all majority Black.

The disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline when relating to Black children in a school setting is a historical fact which persists to this day (Butler et al., 2012; Copalan & Nelson, 2019; Gage et al., 2019). Moreover, this phenomenon occurs throughout the country. For example, Lacoe and Manly (2019) verified that in Maryland Black students were suspended at more than twice the rate of other students. Vincent et al., (2012) observed in the states comprising the Pacific Northwest, Black students were also more than twice as likely to be given exclusionary discipline than were their White counterparts. The fact that this discrepancy exists is an undeniable fact. What needs to follow is an analysis of the causes of this inequitable treatment.

**Critical Race Theory**

The traditional approach to school discipline is to establish rules for behavior and codes of conduct. When misbehavior occurs, school officials identify the nature of the act, the student or students responsible, and determine the appropriate disciplinary response (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). However, this approach does not consider other relevant factors. It is prudent to examine the possibility, even probability, that the pervasive occurrence of the inequitable use of exclusionary discipline is the product of
biases. While these may not be conscious biases, they potentially still affect the relationship between the educator and the student. These can best be revealed when viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

**Historical Background**

Initially it should be noted that CRT does not contend that White people are actively prejudiced against Black people. However, conscious and unconscious biases do still exist and lead to discrimination in employment, education, and social settings. CRT identifies something much more subtle than intentional racism. It focuses attention on the propensity for individuals to be socially and economically grouped with others who have similar physical and ethnic characteristics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Moreover, the dominant group has patterns of working and perceptions which create values unique to their cultural background (Dattel, 2017).

While there is not 100% agreement on what constitutes CRT, there are tenets with which scholars would agree. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identified first that racism is a pervasive and ordinary occurrence. They observed, “racism is ordinary…the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (p. 8). This is in part because racism is not addressed because it is not acknowledged. There is an impression of equality in social settings because the same rules apply to everyone, regardless of racial background (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Stated differently, the perception is that having the same rules precludes the possibility of inequities, which in turn eliminates racial biases. Another theme of CRT is that the concepts of race and races are, “not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). The concept of
significant racial differences and of races in general is based on very superficial factors.
“People with common origins share certain physical traits, of course, such as skin color, physique, and hair texture. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). People have a great deal in common and those deviations have little to do with distinctly human characteristics such as personality, mental capacity, and moral character.

CRT does not identify racism solely as an intentional act of discrimination or an action that belittles people of color. While these are examples of racism, CRT contends that much racial inequity is unintended (George, 2021). “It exposes the ways that racism is often cloaked in terminology regarding mainstream, normal, or traditional values or neutral policies, principals, or practices” (George, 2021, p. 2). This exists in all facets of society, including education. “CRT observes that scholarship that ignores race is not demonstrating neutrality but adherence to the existing racial hierarchy” (George, 2021, p. 2). The use of CRT in an approach to research and analysis reveals problems in current educational practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These issues include discipline policies that disproportionately impact students of color (George, 2021).

CRT helps explain why, decades after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s, multiple legislative actions and judicial interpretation intended to eliminate the legal basis for racial discrimination, there were still examples of inequitable treatment (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). CRT was born of a need to understand the foundations of racism, discrimination, and the inequalities stemming from racism. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identify four critical characteristics of racism. First, racism is ordinary. It is not the
exception, but is a standard way for people to perceive others. Secondly, racism serves the purpose of the dominant race. Third, race and races are reinterpreted based on societal interests at any given time. Finally, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state, “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity” (p. 9). Bonilla-Silva (2015) defines racism as embedded in society, changing over time, and contemporary. Due to a system of racial domination, Bonilla-Silva (2015) believes racial inequality may seem to be a natural process, rather than the product of domination.

An initial precept of CRT is that the concept of race is a social construct, not a biological reality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Granted, a child will carry the physical characteristics of their parents. They will have similar skin color, facial and other physical features, hair color and texture, etc. However, these are superficial characteristics when compared with substantial human qualities including intelligence and mental capacity, compassion for the needs and interests of others, and creative abilities which can lead to new discoveries and insights (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The second foundational belief of CRT is that in typical societal interactions, racial bias is the norm, not the exception. The dominant group in any society will tend to impose its cultural values on marginalized groups as a routine course of action. The social patterns of the dominant group become the accepted norms for all, regardless of status (Crenshaw, 2011).

**Impact on the Study**

It should be noted that CRT does not focus on a history of bad policies or harmful individual choices that discriminate against Black people (George, 2021). It is evidenced in policy, behavioral expectations, and standards which reflect the cultural norms of the
dominant group. Terms like “traditional, neutral, normal, mainstream” (George, 2021, p. 2) are used to describe the kinds of behaviors and choices consistent with accepted societal patterns of those who have Northern-European ancestry. Removing acts of racial discrimination, however welcome this improvement may be, is not the same as addressing the inherent cultural bias that permeates society, including our schools (Dattel, 2017).

Using exclusionary discipline has been called into serious question. Losen et al. (2015) state, “Frequently suspending children from school for minor offenses is not educationally sound” (p. 9). They continue by adding that increased suspension rates do not make schools a safer place for children. Yet, exclusionary discipline continues throughout the nation. Losen (2011) notes a substantial increase in the percentage of students suspended. From the 1972-1973 school year to the 2006-2007 school year the percentage of students suspended more than doubled (p. 6). Particularly troublesome is the rate of suspensions among Black students, which increased from 6% to 15%. In fact, Butler et al. (2012) contend, “African American students are most interesting, seeing how they are targeted for disciplinary action in the greatest number; yet, they are generally no more likely to display higher levels of disruptive behavior than that exhibited than their counterparts” (p. 11). Skiba et al. (2002) found that while boys tended to be more frequently disruptive than girls, there was no difference when examining the racial background of the boys. In other words, Black male students were no more likely to be disruptive than were their White counterparts.

Delgato and Stefancic (2017) recognize race is a social construct, as opposed to a biological fact. That does not, however, mean that a simple statement that race as a
concept does not exist will cause the historic cultural differences to disappear. Delgato and Stefancic (2017) state, “Racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” (p. 21). This is a long-standing condition which humanity has practiced for generations. The conquering nation and the dominant groups, “universally demonize their subjects to feel better about exploiting them” (Delgato & Stefancic, 2017, p. 21).

This does not assert that all, or even most, White people in authority are consciously dismissive of Black people’s cultural background or that White people actively discriminate against Black people. It does, however, mean that the standards against which acceptable and unacceptable conduct are measured are the product of predominately White values and behavioral expectations. This includes formulating standards of behavior and student expectations in school settings and the decisions made regarding actions to take when rules are violated. This is especially evident when students are given exclusionary discipline for actions that may not be seen as misbehavior, or even inappropriate behavior, in the context of their cultural and family values and traditions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Dattel (2017) succinctly describes this phenomenon by observing, “America’s current definition of multiculturalism leads to divisiveness” (p.270).

With the realization that exclusionary discipline can inappropriately be used to correct behavioral issues in schools, and the fact that exclusionary discipline is given to Black students more frequently than White students, it is appropriate to discuss the outcomes and potential harms this practice is causing. If exclusionary discipline has negative effects, its use should be called into question. Moreover, since Black students
are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline as a consequence, it is evident the negative effects of this discipline are more lasting for them.

**Negative Outcomes**

With a clear understanding that exclusionary discipline is not equitably used in elementary and secondary schools, it is important to explore what harm results from exclusionary discipline as well as its uneven application (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). “Exclusionary discipline is correlated with decreased student achievement. Schools with high rates of suspension tend to have lower test scores, even adjusting for demographic differences” (Glenn et al., 2020, p. 8). If the practice of exclusionary discipline was associated with improving behavior, its application could be seen as an overall benefit. However, Glenn et al. (2020) reveal that a review of data from the American Psychological Association, “found little evidence to support the claim that zero tolerance curbed student misbehavior and advocated for schools to move away from zero tolerance and reliance on exclusionary discipline” (p.7). Moreover, with the zero-tolerance approach, the authority to determine corrective actions is often assigned to the criminal justice system, rather than the school. (Newey, 2019).

Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009) state, “Minority youth are more likely than their White counterparts to receive exclusionary discipline in the school system” (p. 1007). They follow this statement with the troubling additional observation that minority youth are also more likely, “to be referred and prosecuted in the juvenile justice system” (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009, p. 1007). Newey (2019) observes that it is particularly problematic when adult standards and expectations of the criminal justice system are applied to youth. Because juveniles are still developing, they are extremely susceptible
to peer pressure, and their identity is in a transitory state. Moreover, once a youth is in the criminal justice system the chances they will commit another infraction increases (Newey, 2019). Additionally, Newey (2019) stated in Utah, “74% of youths charged with low-level misdemeanors are screened as a high-risk to reoffend” (p. 236).

There are examples of research findings that have documented problems stemming from the use of exclusionary discipline, and the greater impact it has on Black students. In fact, there are a plethora of articles written for prestigious academic journals that have analyzed issues leading to poor attendance in elementary and secondary schools, behavior problems, students dropping out before graduating from high school, and the long-range problems dropping out can cause. Exclusionary discipline is often cited as a major cause or at least a contributing factor in a student's disengagement with school. The fact that students with low attendance, for whatever reason, miss critical learning events as well as developmental opportunities has been demonstrated on many occasions and over a span of many years (Glenn et al., 2020; Newey, 2019; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2019; Quin, 2019).

The inequitable application of discipline, especially exclusionary discipline is another phenomenon identified by several researchers (Newey, 2019; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Perry & Morris, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014). This practice can not only lead to a disconnection with school, the student also loses the educational experiences they would have had, falls behind (or further behind) in their work, and has strained relationships with classmates, teachers, and other adults at school. That this discipline is inequitable applies to particular groups of students, i.e. Black and low income, is an additional indictment of its use. Those studies that also identified gender identified more frequent
discipline for male students than female. There was one study which revealed an anomaly in frequency of gender discipline. Martin et al. (2016) found Native American girls were more likely to receive discipline than Native American boys.

Some scholars have also hypothesized all students encounter a version of collateral damage when schools rely on exclusionary discipline as a primary recourse. These scholars conclude the environment created in the schools negatively affects the emotional health and academic performance of even those students who are not the subject of exclusionary discipline (Bal et al., 2017; Bock et al., 1998; Brown & DiTillio, 2013). Several studies confirm in many school districts, Black and low-income students receive exclusionary discipline more frequently than their White, higher income counterparts. The disproportionate use of discipline, of all types, can be found in urban as well as rural districts; wealthy as well as low income districts; suburban districts, and districts of all sizes (Newey, 2019; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Perry & Morris, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014). This finding concerning the frequency of a disparity in discipline is found throughout the studies. Many identified the inequity as being focused only on Black students, where others also identified the inequities to be associated with low income and some students with disabilities, typically those with diagnosed behavioral issues (Bal et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2019; Losen et al., 2014). Some studies identified Latino students as the target of these inequities, while others found no inequitable treatment of these individuals (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; Garba et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2002). (See Figure 4)

The researchers who engage in these studies are usually educators. Many teach in schools of education at universities throughout the nation. There are, however, a
significant number of researchers in social work, sociology, and psychology (Haight et al., 2016). The researchers have used a mix of methodologies. Many have used reports that school districts generate regarding academic performance, attendance, and frequency and type of discipline imposed on students as their data sources (Ding & Navarro, 2004; Froese-Germain, 2001; London et al., 2016; Moussa, 2017; Rogers et al., 2016). Some have included information secured from interviews with educators, parents, students, and school officials in their data. There are also longitudinal studies that identify and analyze the life trajectory of persons who had repeated exclusionary discipline while in elementary and secondary schools (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014). (See Figure 4)

The Civil Rights Data Collection of 2014 includes reports and statistics regarding nearly 50 million students and over 95,000 public schools. Although not all studies clearly identified these as their data source, it is evident all are referring to the same tabulation of data. It was the most recent data available when these studies were conducted and their articles submitted for publication. While there is a great deal of analysis of data collected from schools and reported to governmental agencies, the research is qualitative.

While the research examines various schools and their disciplinary experiences, there is a question which has not been adequately addressed. Studies show Black students receive exclusionary discipline at a higher percentage rate than White students, and at a higher rate than other minority students (Aiyon et al., 2018). Findings also indicate a higher frequency of discipline for students from low income households (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Kubina & McConnell, 2014; Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Kubina and
McConnel (2014) affirm there are a higher percentage of Black students who are also low income than there are White students who are also low income. The question that has not yet been addressed is if the higher incidents of discipline noted in previous studies are correlated more highly with race or income.

While it can be shown that low income students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline, is this true of all low-income students, regardless of ethnic and racial background? In other words, do low income students who are White, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, etc. experience similar disciplinary treatment as that of low-income Black students? Moreover, do higher income Black students have similar experiences with exclusionary discipline as higher income students in other groups?

Answering these questions would help identify if the inequities which clearly exist are a product of racial group, income level, or a combination of both.

**Figure 4**

*Summarization of Studies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study and Sample</th>
<th>Methodology/Analysis</th>
<th>Scope of Study</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anderson, K. P., &amp; Ritter, G. W. (2017): Disparate use of exclusionary discipline: Evidence on inequities in school discipline from a U.S. state</td>
<td>PO; Examination of statistics over seven-year period</td>
<td>Statewide (Arkansas)</td>
<td>Black students are 2.4 times as likely to receive exclusionary discipline than students of other ethnicities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Study Type/Methods</td>
<td>Schools/Context</td>
<td>Study Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anyon, Y., et. al. (2018)</td>
<td>Qualitative study; Participant/Professional interviews; Focus group workshops</td>
<td>Denver Public Schools with special focus on schools with low suspension records</td>
<td>Study adds more information to the relationship between faculty and students, income, and race in exclusionary discipline. It finds lower suspending schools have stronger student and teacher relationships. It also finds lower suspending schools are more likely to be located in higher income areas of the district.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bal, A., Betters-Bubon, J., &amp; Fish, R. E. (2017)</td>
<td>Multi-level logistic analysis</td>
<td>Statewide (Wisconsin)</td>
<td>Black students are seven times more likely than White students to receive exclusionary discipline and are also two to three times more likely to be labeled as emotionally disturbed. It also identified income, language, gender, and academic proficiency were factors in diagnosing students as emotionally disturbed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell, C. (2020)</td>
<td>Personal interview; Literature review; Statistical analysis</td>
<td>Single school district in Michigan</td>
<td>Black students and their parents perceive exclusionary discipline as unfair because student officials do not listen to or understand Black students and students feel school officials target them based on their dress, hair, and music preferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Research Methods</td>
<td>Data Collection Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gibson, P., Wilson, R., Haight, W., Kayama, M., &amp; Marshal, J. (2014)</td>
<td>The role of race in the out-of-school suspensions of Black students: The perspectives of students with suspensions, their parents and educators</td>
<td>Students and caregivers felt Black students are targeted for disciplinary actions and treated harsher than White students. Educators identified instances of misbehavior of Black students and identified a disproportionate exposure to social problems and poverty.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kubina, R. M., Jr. &amp; McConnell, B. M. (2014)</td>
<td>Connecting with families to improve students’ school attendance: a review of literature</td>
<td>Mixed methods study; Literature review</td>
<td>Family characteristics and involvement are key factors in poor student attendance. Poor student attendance is the primary reason for students dropping out of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London, R. A., Sanchez, M., &amp; Castrechini, S. (2016)</td>
<td>The dynamics of chronic absence and student achievement</td>
<td>Quantitative study</td>
<td>Analysis of longitudinal records to examine chronic absence for elementary through secondary students and identifies outcomes related to chronic absences. Students who are chronically absent in one year tend to repeat this pattern. There are initial gaps in student academic scores that continue year after year. The largest predictor of chronic absence is prior chronic absences and excessive tardiness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Data Source</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin, J. L., Sharp-Grier, M., &amp; Smith, J. B. (2016): Alternate realities: racially disparate discipline in classrooms and schools and its effects on Black and brown students</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>95,635 public schools (grades K-12)</td>
<td>Black or Native American students received the most discipline. For groups other than Native Americans, male students were more likely to receive punishment than female students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh, K., Ellwood, K, McCall, L, &amp; Girvan, E. J. (2018): Using discipline data to enhance equity in school discipline</td>
<td>Data Analysis (PBIS data); Case study</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>Black students have the highest rate of suspension nationwide. White students had 4.8% suspension rate, White males with disabilities had a 9.2% suspension rate. Black males with disabilities had a 26.8% suspension rate. Across the nation nearly 20% school districts suspended over 50% of Black male secondary students with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry, B. &amp; Morris, E. (2014): Suspending progress: Collateral consequences of exclusionary punishment in public schools</td>
<td>Longitudinal data analysis</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>The use of exclusionary discipline has collateral damage for students not receiving the discipline. Results offer a strong argument of excessively punitive school policies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Skiba, R. J., Arredondo, M. I., & Williams, N. T. (2014). More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline

| Literature review | Multiple locations | Analyses suggest regardless of demographic, achievement, or system status, exclusionary discipline creates a risk factor for problematic outcomes |

*Note.* Information in Figure 4 is a summarization of studies by the researcher.

These findings illustrate the problems with exclusionary discipline. We also can see a significantly more frequent use of exclusionary discipline with Black students. In fact, this situation has been hypothesized and verified repeatedly over several years and in a host of locations. With all this evidence, one wonders why the problem still exists and is so widespread. Perhaps the reason is that we have not approached the situation through the appropriate perspective. If we acknowledge the tenets of CRT, we can better understand the deep-seated reasons for inequitable treatment based of racial background.

With an understanding that the use of exclusionary discipline is an issue for schools nationwide, coupled with a widespread tendency for this form of discipline to be inequitably applied based on race, it is prudent to examine the experiences at specific schools. Each needs to see if their experiences are consistent with the national patterns. It is important that each district examine, as has Springfield Public Schools (SPS), their own use of exclusionary discipline. They should assess its usefulness and be diligent in determining how and when it occurs. Special attention must be directed at any proclivity toward inequitable application of disciplinary actions.
Application to the District

The specific experiences of Springfield Public Schools (SPS) as relates to exclusionary discipline, its use by race, and efforts to address inequities are the ultimate direction of this study. The national trend of zero tolerance and “get tough” (Skiba & Losen, 2015, p. 5) policies were a product of the 1970’s, but they were also accompanied by concerns of over-reaching disciplines and inequitable application (Skiba & Losen, 2015). “Most teachers say discipline is inconsistent or inadequate and that the recent decline in suspensions is at least partly explained by higher tolerance for misbehavior or increased underreporting” (Griffith & Tyner, 2019, p. 9). Steinberg and Lacoe (2017) observed that despite the implementation of a policy aimed to reduce out-of-school-suspension (OSS) in Philadelphia, suspensions actually increased relative to other Pennsylvania districts. In fact, there was an increase for the next three successive years. Moreover, there was an increase in serious infractions and an increase in the truancy rate. Griffith and Tyner (2019) also reported, “Most teachers say the majority of students suffer because of a few chronically disruptive peers” (p.11). It is these reactions that need to be examined with a sensitivity for the underlying reasons for their occurrence. It is also necessary to examine the experiences of individual school districts to determine if they are consistent with the national norms. This leads to an appraisal of the status of exclusionary discipline and equitable use of exclusionary discipline in SPS.

As previously noted SPS has experienced a significantly higher rate of disciplinary actions directed toward Black students than White students. This is not a situation that is unique to SPS (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). There are districts throughout
the United States where this situation also exists (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Garba & Tajalli, 2014; Johnson, 2017; Martin et al., 2016; Porowski et al., 2014; Quin, 2019).

The data shows there is an inequitable treatment of students based on racial and ethnic backgrounds (dese.mo.gov, 2020). This circumstance surfaces most frequently in disciplinary actions. This recognition has led to an acceptance of the need for equity awareness and training. However, there does not appear to be an overriding theory that drives the proposed training.

There are significant discipline disparities between White, non-marginalized students and those previously identified. The inequities are evidenced through the district’s data points regarding disciplinary events, student attendance, graduation rates, and student achievement (dese.mo.gov, 2020). The discrepancy is shown to be especially pronounced when comparing the student measures of White students and Black students. The data regarding incidents resulting in disciplinary action revealed White students were involved in 67% of the incidents, while 26% involved Black students. Restated, this data demonstrates that a quarter of the disciplinary events at SPS involved a racial group representing less than 10% of the enrollment (dese.mo.gov, 2020). By way of additional comparison, the third largest ethnic group in SPS is those students who identify as Hispanic. These students comprise seven percent of the total enrollment but represent only five percent of the students receiving disciplinary action (SPS, 2019). Clearly there is a discrepancy in the disciplinary action directed toward Black students as opposed to that experienced by other racial groups.

Research (e.g., Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Garba & Tajalli, 2014; London et al., 2016; Moussa, 2017; Mullet, 2014; Rogers et al., 2017) indicates a correlation between
the inequities in discipline and the attendance and graduation rates for Black students. Research also suggests Black students score lower on standardized tests than White students (Black et al., 1994; Ding & Navarro, 2004; Froese-Germain, 2001; Hsiung et al., 1994; Supovitz & Brennan, 1997; Syverson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Additionally, research confirms lower attendance rates correlate with lower test scores (London et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). As a result of these realities, Black students have a higher dropout percentage rate than White students and may experience a much bleaker future (Kubina Jr., & McConnell, 2014; Moussa, 2017; Rogers et al., 2016; Quin, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

While the district has recognized the disparity in the disciplinary practices, it is apparent that current diversity education and expectations are not adequate to ensure teachers are well grounded in the need for sensitivity to student differences. Moreover, there is not a comprehensive evaluation of SPS’s efforts to address disparities. There needs to be a concentrated effort to recognize and analyze inequitable disciplinary practices and their causes. There exists a lack of analysis of the evidence available to the district. Such an analysis would lead to a theory-based program of equity awareness training.

Two things are now evident. SPS, like many other school districts with White and Black students, has seen an inequitable application of exclusionary discipline. Also, the use of exclusionary discipline in any instance can, and frequently does, bring harm to both the misbehaving child and their classmates. It should also be noted that SPS has
made at least initial efforts to analyze and address inequities in their policies. The
pervasiveness of disciplinary disparities is not due to a lack of research. Skiba and Losen
(2015) related the findings of a research group comprised of 26 researchers and
educators. They suggested the keys to eradicating the discipline disparities are, “building
supportive relationships, insuring academic rigor, engaging in culturally relevant and
responsive teaching, and creating bias-free classrooms and respectful student
environments” (p. 8). Some states have taken active steps to lessen the frequency of
exclusionary discipline or have mandated that districts provide academically meaningful
work assignments for students who are experiencing exclusionary discipline (Steinberg &
Lacoe, 2017).

Other researchers have argued that more in-depth examination of a district’s data
regarding performance and discipline will reveal additional areas where changes designed
to lessening inequities are indicated (Potter & Stefkovich, 2008). Moreover, Potter and
Stefkovich (2008) also cited a current and accurate understanding of laws and regulations
concerning education, continual updates of data, employing highly qualified educators
with a special emphasis on those teaching core subjects, and transparency in reporting
data will help a district identify shortcomings and develop the necessary resources to
address problems.

Thomas Lasley (2008) saw two significant barriers to the effective use of data. He
acknowledged the need for additional time invested by teachers and administration as
well as more time in professional development to increase their skills in data acquisition
and analysis. However, Lasley (2008) stated, “Even if more time is provided and
enhanced data analysis skills are acquired, the full capacity for high-performance data-
based decision making requires two additional, essential ingredients” (p. 253). Lasley (2008) proceeded to identify those two elements as, “an appreciation of the inquiry process and empowerment to act on acquired knowledge’ (p. 253). He continued by explaining, “These two ingredients move educators beyond being minimally involved consumers of data to a level where they champion effective data-based decisions” (pp. 253-254). This approach of using a clear and transparent understanding of data to drive policy is not unique to education. “Scholars in almost all disciplinary fields use data to reach conclusions or produce recommendations that in turn become the foundation for public policy” (Lasley, 2008, p. 244).

A United States Commission of Civil Rights Briefing (2019) recommended steps at the federal government level that could help address the disciplinary inequities experienced throughout the nation. First, “The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) should continue to offer guidance to school communities regarding how to comply with federal non-discrimination laws” (p. 168). A second recommendation is for Congress to continue providing the necessary resources for local school districts to offer training, guidance, and support to their teachers in developing and utilizing non-discriminatory discipline. Another suggestion is for OCR to enforce existing civil rights laws (United States Commission of Civil Rights Briefing, 2019). At the risk of appearing flippant, it seems if these suggestions provided the solution for the problems identified, they would, at minimum, be making end roads toward a solution.

While offering guidance, providing funding, and enforcing the laws are critical roles the federal agencies should clearly supply, they are already doing each of these things with no real progress. The only novel recommendation stemming from the 2019
Briefing was that specific federal funds should be provided to local school districts to employ more counselors and social workers (United States Commission of Civil Rights Briefing, 2019). That would be a welcome resource, but it underscores that the solution to inequitable discipline will have to occur at the local level through a new awareness and action on the part of the local district and its employees. An inconsistency schools must address to be truly equitable in the establishment and maintenance of a sound and safe educational environment, is to clearly define what is meant by misbehavior or inappropriate actions. Schools sometimes use terms that are quite specific, “Fights while under school supervision” (Glenn et al., 2020, p. 28).

However, others may be less specific. Some may allude to aggression and physical attack without specifying precisely what happened, and others are a simple act of defiance, such as leaving the room without permission (Glenn et al., 2020). In these cases, it is often left to the classroom teacher to initially determine the nature and seriousness of the offense. Without definite, descriptive terms and specific guidelines, the potential for inequitable actions are dependent on the teacher or administrator and their background and values.

These suggestions and insights are helpful in developing disciplinary policy. However, it is necessary to recognize that much of the decision-making in schools is a subjective process. It can be greatly influenced by the personal values and background of the individual in charge (Glenn et al., 2020). It follows then, that the faculty and administration of a school play greatest role in creating an over-reliance on exclusionary discipline, as well as its inequitable use. It is the faculty and administration who will have to be responsible for changing it.
Conclusion

The use of exclusionary discipline has been called into serious question. There are clear disadvantages for the disciplined child by missing the learning experience of being in the classroom. Additionally, they can feel separated from their peers and lose a sense of identity with the group. Moreover, the tension that accompanies exclusionary discipline can create an adversarial environment which would potentially have a negative effect on the entire class, including students who are not the subject of the disciplinary action.

The problems with exclusionary discipline are compounded when the pattern of inequitable use based on race is added to the occurrence. In repeated studies, racial bias and inequitable use of exclusionary discipline have been shown to exist. While laws have been passed to eliminate racial discrimination, and policies enacted to encourage equitable treatment, the existence of inequitable use of exclusionary discipline still exists. The application of CRT to this issue reveals a propensity for members of a dominant racial group to inherently mistrust members of other groups. With that perspective, it is necessary for efforts to be two-fold; first, recognizing this situation exists, and second, taking steps to address it.

The result of exclusionary discipline can be extremely harmful. By separating a child from the group, there is a pattern established resulting in lower test scores and lower grades. This can be accompanied with absences and eventually dropping out of school. There is even a correlation between exclusionary discipline and eventual encounters with juvenile and adult legal systems and issues leading to incarceration.
While the agencies charged with monitoring and enforcing federal and state regulations can set standards and expectations, it is the local district that must assume responsibility for addressing the fact of racially-based disciplinary disparities. The district must recognize that it is the faculty and administrators in each building who are truly responsible for the management of disciplinary expectations. Each district should actively pursue policies and practices of introspection. This requires analyzing their own performance with a close examination of potential disciplinary discrimination. The district should then be diligent in its efforts to address any problem, current or future, in the equitable treatment of all its students.
Section Four

Contribution to Practice

To Be Presented to the Springfield Public Schools

Executive Leadership Team
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discipline Discrepancies in the District

Statement of Problem: Within Springfield Public Schools (SPS) there are marked disparities between the rate of exclusionary discipline for White, non-marginalized students and all other groups of students (dese.mo.gov, 2020). The disparity is most pronounced when comparing White students and Black students. However, there is an absence of literature examining whether or not this discrepancy is recognized, and why this discrepancy exists despite efforts to address the problem.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, to examine existing disparities that exist in school discipline within SPS comparing Black and White students, with a particular focus on exclusionary discipline assigned to Black students. Then, to determine what contributing factors have led to an environment where Black students may receive exclusionary discipline significantly more often than their White counterparts.

Research Questions: Four research questions guided this study:
1. According to SPS administrators and educators, what disparities exist in school exclusionary school discipline between Black and White students in SPS?
2. According to SPS administrators and educators, how do policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and White students in SPS?
3. According to SPS administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline between Black and White students in SPS?
4. According to SPS administrators and educators, in what ways can racial disparities be reduced in exclusionary school discipline between Black and White students in SPS?

Participants & Data Sources:
District Documentation Data
Statistics for the last five academic years, 2017-2018 through 2020-2021 were provided by the district statistics department.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question Data</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Directors</td>
<td>X (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Principals</td>
<td>X (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Principals</td>
<td>X (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Teachers</td>
<td>X (41)</td>
<td>X (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Teachers</td>
<td>X (60)</td>
<td>X (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed; identified and coded and then analyzed.

Findings:

- Black students received exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than White students, despite a reduction in the overall use of exclusionary discipline.

- The executive directors recognized disparities in the rate of exclusionary discipline between Black and White students. However, other respondents did not believe there was significant disparity. All respondents believed students from lower income households receive exclusionary discipline at a higher rate.

- All participants agreed district policies regarding exclusionary discipline are imprecise, subjective, and inconsistent. Some did not feel this was necessarily a bad quality in the policies as buildings serve different populations.

- All participants identified the primary cause of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline as staff members’ lack of appreciation for cultural and ethnic differences.

- There was consensus among all there is a need for change and progress. The majority believed implementing practices such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Justice, and Cognitive Discipline have beneficial impacts on student behaviors.

Recommendations: The researcher recommends the district should:

1. intensify its efforts to sensitize all employees regarding the differences that exist in our community, and how those differences may affect actions, reactions, and interpretations of behaviors and communication.
2. examine the directions offered to faculty regarding the use of exclusionary discipline in an effort to provide more specific guidance to administrators in the decision to use exclusionary discipline.
3. inform all staff personnel that an imbalance in the use of exclusionary discipline does, in fact, exist in our schools, and encourage all staff to be more sensitive to this issue.

References:
An Analysis of Exclusionary Discipline Disparities Between Black and White Students

A dissertation research study presented by Margaret Griffith

Problem Statement

In SPS there is a significantly higher rate of exclusionary disciplinary actions directed toward Black students than White students.

- Attendance
- Academic Achievement
- Graduation Rate
**Purpose**

Disparities in exclusionary discipline between White and Black students were examined and possible causality was identified.

**Why**

This is a nation-wide problem that reduces the quality of education for Black students.

(Quin, 2019)

**Equity**

It is the intent of Springfield Public Schools to offer an equitable education to all students.

“Prepare all students for tomorrow by providing engaging, relevant and personalized educational experiences today” (SPS, 2021).
Research Questions

- According to SPS administrators and educators, what disparities exist in exclusionary discipline in SPS between Black and White students?
- According to SPS administrators and educators, how do the policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and white students in SPS?
- According to SPS administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students in SPS?
- According to SPS administrators and educators, in what ways can the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline be reduced between Black and White students in SPS?

You can change the background image to fit your topic or brand.

Design of the Study

- Mixed Methods
  - Qualitative (open-ended)
  - Quantitative (close-ended)

- Triangulation of Data

(Mertens, 2020)
Setting
The settings are SPS schools with six percent or more Black student enrollment.

- High Schools
- Middle Schools
- Elementary Schools

Participants
- District Executive Leaders - 3 district executive director interviews
- Building Principals - 10 building principal interviews
- Certified Classroom Teachers - 8 focus group participants (5 elementary, 3 secondary), 102 survey participants (60 elementary, 41 secondary, 1 who did not indicate)
Data Collection Tools and Procedures

The participants were extended an invitation, provided assurance of confidentiality, and agreed to an informed consent document.

- **Interviews**: three district leaders, 10 building principals, 45 minutes (Seidman, 2019)
- **Focus Groups**: two focus groups, one consisted of five elementary and one consisted of three secondary certified teachers, one hour (Krueger & Casey, 2015)
- **Surveys**: 13 Likert items, sent to certified classroom teachers at the participating buildings (Fink, 2017) (January, 2022 - February 2022)

Data Analysis

- **Open Coding** - being receptive to all possibilities while making notations that are potentially relevant
- **Focused Coding** - selecting data that is directly relevant to the study
- **Compare New and Existing Data**

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2017)
**Positionality**

- White woman
- Missouri Native
- Four generations of college-educated ancestors
- One older brother
- Graduate of two major universities (B.S. Ed, M.S. Ed, EdS)
- SPS educator 20 + years (teacher and administrator)

**Ethical Practices & Trustworthiness**

- Obtained approval from University of Missouri IRB
- Obtained approval from SPS IRB
- Adhered to trustworthy research practices

The purpose of an IRB is to, “ensure that researchers follow the maximum that should govern research as it does medicine: do no harm” (Booth et. al, 2016, p.84).

*(Booth et. al„ 2016)*
District Data

- **Student Population** – Approximately 23,200 student enrolment, approximately 17,000 White and 2,000 Black students. The ratio is approximately 9 White students to every 1 Black student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Black</th>
<th>Total White</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Percentage of White Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Black Population</th>
<th>Ratio of White to Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>19153</td>
<td>24937</td>
<td>76.8%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>9.48:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>18820</td>
<td>24924</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>9.36:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>18377</td>
<td>24681</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>9.26:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>17026</td>
<td>23142</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.93:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-2022</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>16950</td>
<td>23435</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>8.53:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

District Data

- **Instances of Exclusionary Discipline** – The ratio has been approximately 3 instances involving White students to every 1 incident involving Black students. There is is a 9:1 White to Black student ratio.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Black Incidents</th>
<th>Total Black Population</th>
<th>Rate of Black Incidents</th>
<th>White Incidents</th>
<th>Total White Population</th>
<th>Rate of White Incidents</th>
<th>Ratio of White to Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>2,696</td>
<td>2,020</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>8,673</td>
<td>19,153</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>2.95:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>2,816</td>
<td>2,010</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>8,935</td>
<td>18,820</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>2.95:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>2,659</td>
<td>1,985</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>8,155</td>
<td>18,377</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>3.01:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>1,906</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>5,170</td>
<td>17,026</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>2.94:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
District Data

- Instances of Unique Exclusionary Discipline – In the 20-21 school year 8% of the Black students received discipline while only 4% of the White students received discipline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Black Unique Incidents</th>
<th>Total Black Population</th>
<th>Rate of Unique Black Incidents</th>
<th>White Unique Incidents</th>
<th>Total White Population</th>
<th>Rate of Unique White Incidents</th>
<th>Ratio of Black to White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>2974</td>
<td>19153</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>2.33:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>1726</td>
<td>18820</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>1.68:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1314</td>
<td>18377</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.54:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>17026</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>1.81:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ 1: According to SPS administrators and educators, what disparities exist in exclusionary discipline in SPS between Black and White students?

- Executive Directors:
  - Believed there was a higher percentage of Black students who received exclusionary discipline than White.
  - Believed racial background was a factor in the frequency of exclusionary discipline.

- Elementary Principals:
  - 3/5 identified a difference in students receiving exclusionary discipline existed.
  - 2/5 did not acknowledge a difference is discipline.
  - Did not agree which group received a higher rate of exclusionary discipline.
    (same rate, higher rate for Black students, higher rate for low income)
Secondary Principals:
- 4/5 acknowledged disparities exist. (low income, minority, male, sped)
- Did not express a feeling that a disparity existed for every group

Elementary Teachers:
- Agreed low-income students and victims of trauma receive discipline at a higher rate.
- They all expressed a need for more sensitivity toward people from groups unlike their own.

Secondary Teachers:
- All agreed low-income students receive discipline at a higher rate.
- 2/3 identified that Black students receive discipline at a higher rate than others.

**RQ 2: According to SPS administrators and educators, how do the policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and White students in SPS?**

Executive Directors:
- All agreed there is a lack of specificities in SPS policies.
- Believed the use of exclusionary discipline practices vary from school to school.

Elementary Principals:
- All 5 believed the policies were in place to ensure student safety.
- All 5 believed exclusionary discipline was a necessary option for discipline, yet less favorable.
Secondary Principals:
- All agreed policies were clear for major infractions (violence, weapons, drugs, sexual misconduct)
- Other than major infractions, policies were imprecise and subjective

Elementary Teachers:
- All believed the policies were in place to insure the safety of staff and students.
- All believed exclusionary discipline is necessary to maintain a safe environment, but a less favorable option and is detrimental to the recipient.

Secondary Teachers:
- All agreed the decision to issue exclusionary discipline is subjective and is inconsistent from school to school.
- All believed exclusionary discipline is necessary.

RQ 3: According to SPS administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students in SPS?

Executive Directors:
- All believed the students’ home environment is a major factor in student behavior.
- Believed there is a problem with teachers’ abilities to relate to students who are different from themselves.

Elementary Principals:
- Believed the actions and reactions of teachers was the primary factor in discipline.
- All identified the teachers’ ability to manage behaviors as well as the teachers’ tolerance of students’ behaviors as the main factors.
Secondary Principals:
- All believed exclusionary discipline can be issued inconsistently due to subjectivity.
- They believed the teacher plays a role in the discipline of a student.

Elementary Teachers:
- Believed the teachers’ classroom management played a key role in student behaviors.
- They believed challenges were especially prevalent in Title One schools.

Secondary Teachers:
- Believed the teacher plays a key role in student behaviors.
- Agreed the child’s feeling about school and their relationships with teachers at school are critical factors and need additional attention from the district.

RQ 4: According to SPS administrators and educators, in what ways can the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline be reduced between Black and White students in SPS?

Executive Directors:
- All believed students should be taught coping skills to help them deal with frustrations and to prevent making poor choices.
- All believed adults must form personal relationships with students.

Elementary Principals:
- All focused on positive rather than punitive options. (proactive approaches)
- All agreed it is important to teach students appropriate behaviors.
- **Secondary Principals:**
  - Believed programs that address behavior issues need to be in place.
  - Believed that proactive practices need to be used to prevent misbehaviors from occurring.
- **Elementary Teachers:**
  - Agreed additional training for staff is needed to make better connections with and to increase sensitivity toward students who have a different cultural background.
  - Believed teachers need more support and training in behavior and classroom management from the district.
- **Secondary Teachers:**
  - Recognized there is a need for more staff sensitivity toward individuals unlike themselves at every level.
  - Believed there is a need for more individualized student attention.

---

**Survey Analysis**

- **Items 1 – 4**: provided an understanding of how successfully the teachers felt their school is offering equitable opportunities and resources for all students.

\[(N=102)\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Opportunities</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>12 (12%)</td>
<td>43 (42%)</td>
<td>30 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Activities</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>10 (10%)</td>
<td>18 (18%)</td>
<td>22 (22%)</td>
<td>40 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for Counseling</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>8 (8%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>18 (18%)</td>
<td>28 (27%)</td>
<td>37 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs Services</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>7 (7%)</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
<td>34 (33%)</td>
<td>30 (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey Analysis

- **Items 5 – 8**: provided an understanding of equitable exclusionary disciplinary practices relating to a student’s gender, age, race, and socio-economic background. 
  
  \[(N=102)\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary Distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic Discipline Applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Applied to Genders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Applied to Age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Analysis

- **Items 9 – 10**: specifically compared the teachers’ perceptions of Black compared to White students’ experiences with exclusionary discipline and Black students’ experiences with exclusionary discipline. 
  
  \[(N=102)\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Black to White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Black to White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Determinations

- According to administrators and educators in SPS, there is inequity in the use of exclusionary discipline when comparing Black and White students.
- Administrators and educators in SPS claimed school policies are imprecise, ambiguous, and lead to subjective decisions.
- Both administrators and educators in SPS observed many teachers and administrators do not perceive that an inequity between Black and White students exists.
- Student data collected by the district revealed 1 out of every 10 Black students received exclusionary discipline while 1 out of 20 White students experienced exclusionary discipline.
- According to administrators and educators in SPS, the majority of teachers and administrators indicated they are not in favor of the use of exclusionary discipline unless absolutely necessary.

Implications

- Inequitable use of exclusionary discipline is not unique to SPS, it is prevalent throughout the country.
- This research can be used to provide a model for other districts in the examination of their own policies and practices.
- This research identifies potential negative results of exclusionary discipline.
Recommendations

- SPS intensify its professional development efforts for their employees regarding cultural and ethnic differences.
- SPS examine the guidelines it offers to administrators and faculty regarding the use of exclusionary discipline.
- SPS inform all staff that an inequity in the use of exclusionary discipline does exist and be transparent about this issue and the measures that will be taken to improve.

Limitations

- While at any given time approximately 24,500 students are enrolled, as many as 32,000 are enrolled during a year. This has a potential of impacting the data.
- The district made several accommodations and adjustments and experienced many extenuating circumstances due to COVID-19. Discipline data for Fourth Quarter, 2020, was non-existent due to virtual learning.
Thank YOU!
Section Five

Contribution to Scholarship

To be Submitted to

The Journal of Pedagogical Research
Abstract

In the existing literature, there is evidence of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline, however, there is an absence of literature examining why this discrepancy exists in light of substantial efforts to address the problem. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to address these concerns. First, the study examines any existing disparities in school discipline within the district. Then, the study seeks to determine what contributing factors have led to an environment where Black students may receive exclusionary discipline significantly more often than their White counterparts. Quantitative findings from this mixed-methods study confirmed Black students received exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than White students at the district, despite a reduction in the overall use of exclusionary discipline in the district. Qualitative data revealed

- some, but not all, district staff believe there was a significant disparity in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students
- all participants agreed the district policies regarding exclusionary discipline are imprecise, subjective, and inconsistent
- all participants identified the primary cause of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline were identified as staff members’ lack of appreciation for cultural and ethnic differences

The researcher recommends a three-fold approach to ameliorate this inequity. These include sharing these findings with all employees, providing sensitivity training for employees, and moving toward more objective criteria for the assignment of exclusionary discipline.
Key terms: in-school-suspension (ISS), out-of-school-suspension (OSS), English language learners (ELL), students from low-income families, students with individualized education plans (IEP), students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and other nontraditional roles and practices (LGBTQ+), equity.

1. Introduction

A Midwest community’s school district is, like many districts throughout the nation, recognizing that inequities exist between its Black and White Students (Block et al., 1994; London et al., 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; State Department of Education, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Nationwide Black students score lower on standardized test (Ding & Navarro, 2004; Syverson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Black students also have lower attendance rates (Moussa, 2017; Mullet, 2014; Rogers et al., 2017), as well as lower graduation rates (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Garba & Tajalli, 2014). These conditions exist at the district in question (State Department of Education, 2020).

The disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline illustrates the inequitable treatment Black students receive (State Department of Education, 2020). Not only does the research indicate that disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline exist (Rogers, 2017), there also exists a correlation between disparities in exclusionary discipline and the attendance and graduation differences between Black and White students (Ding & Navarro, 2004; Kubina Jr., & McConnell, 2014). The national tendency is a higher dropout rate for Black students and less promising prospects for the future (Kubina Jr. & McConnell, 2014; Mousa, 2017; Quin, 2019; Rogers, et al., 2016).
The records of racial disparity in the use of exclusionary discipline in this school district were examined. It included a review of pertinent literature and the statistical reports generated by the district. It also included opinions and observations of district personnel regarding racial disparity. The study included interviews with district-wide administrators, as well as elementary and secondary principals, focus groups comprised of elementary and secondary teachers, and surveys sent to each certified classroom teacher in the district.

There exists an inequitable treatment of students based on racial and ethnic backgrounds. This circumstance surfaces most frequently in disciplinary actions. This recognition has led to an acceptance of the need for equity awareness and training. However, there does not appear to be an overriding theory driving the proposed training.

1.1 Problem

There are significant discipline disparities between White, non-marginalized students and all other groups of students. The inequities are evidenced through the district’s data points regarding disciplinary events (State Department of Education, 2020). The disparity is especially pronounced when comparing the data points of White students and Black students. The data regarding incidents resulting in disciplinary action revealed White students were involved in 67% of the incidents, while Black students were involved in 26% of the incidents. Restated, these data demonstrate that a quarter of the disciplinary events in the district involved a racial group representing less than 10% of the enrollment (State Department of Education, 2020).

As a result of these realities, Black students have a higher dropout percentage rate than White students and may experience a less promising future (Kubina Jr., &
McConnell, 2014; Moussa, 2017; Rogers et al., 2016; Quin, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). It is apparent that current diversity education and expectations are not adequate to ensure teachers are well grounded in the need for sensitivity to student differences.

1.2 Context

The primary audience for this study is the administrators and educators in the district and other districts experiencing the same issues. In the existing literature, there is evidence of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline; in-school-suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), and expulsion. There is also evidence which indicates some teachers and administrators tend to, perhaps unintentionally, use exclusionary discipline with Black students in situations where they would be less likely to use it with White students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). There needs to be a concentrated effort to recognize and analyze inequitable disciplinary practices and their causes. There exists a lack of analysis of the evidence available to the district. Such an analysis would lead to a theory-based program of equity awareness training for all educators and administrators.

1.3 Setting

The individuals who participated in the study were serving in schools with 6% or more Black student enrollment. In the district there are several schools in which the student enrollment is so small as to not provide sufficient data to contribute to the findings. Those schools with at least 6% Black student enrollment provided an accurate assessment of variations of treatment including incidents of disciplinary actions. Contact was made by statistics’ department through the district communication channels.
1.4 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine existing disparities in exclusionary school discipline within the district. Specifically, the focus was on the use of exclusionary discipline with Black students compared to White students. The participants included district leaders as well as classroom teachers and building administrators currently serving in grades kindergarten-12 in buildings with 6% or more Black student enrollment (The District, 2020). The study’s aim was not only to document existing disparities, but additionally to also identify contributing factors.

The study provided examples of disciplinary measures and the use of these measures with White and Black students. Both the choice of disciplinary action and the frequency was studied. Finally, the overriding purpose were to determine what contributing factors, both on the part of the individual educators, and the district as a whole have led to an environment where Black students may receive exclusionary discipline significantly more often than their White counterparts.

There were four research questions guiding this study. The first was, “According to district administrator and educators, what disparities exist in exclusionary discipline in the district between Black and White students?” The answers to this question provided an assessment of current status and a vision for potential future growth and improvements. The second question was, “According to district administrators and educators, how do the policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and white students in the district?” Documents were obtained and analyzed regarding student discipline coupled with qualitative input from educators.
The third research question was, “According to district administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students in the district?” The fourth question was, “According to district administrators and educators, in what ways can the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline be reduced between Black and White students in the district?” This analysis was a mixed methods study that included stories and data. The answers to these questions will shape future decisions and actions.

2. Method

This mixed methods study consisted of a concurrent design which included a qualitative and quantitative research approach (Mertens, 2020). A mixed methods study is an approach to research in the social, behavioral, and health sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative, or closed-ended, and qualitative, or open-ended data. The researcher integrates the two and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems (Creswell, 2015). The data was then triangulated (Mertens, 2020).

The researcher included an examination and analysis of the district data regarding discipline. The district policies outline infractions that may lead to exclusionary discipline (The District, 2021). The information gathered allowed for the examination of the frequency of disciplinary actions as they related to the racial background of the students, specifically Black students in comparison to White students. In addition, an examination of the district policies and procedures combined with conversations with district leaders and opinions of educators produced an understanding that led to identifying problems and shortcomings as well as capitalizing on strengths and successes.
Using these methods, it is appropriate that the researcher examined areas where change is needed and strove to emphasize that fact (Mertens, 2020).

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The study employed a mixed methods research analysis as seen through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Mertens, 2020). It is essential to understand the meaning and implications of CRT. George (2021) defines CRT: “It critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tier” (p. 1).

While there is not unanimous agreement on what constitutes CRT, there are tenets with which scholars would agree. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identified first that racism is a pervasive and ordinary occurrence. They observed, “racism is ordinary…the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (p. 8). This is in part because racism is not addressed because it is not acknowledged. There is a perception of equality in social settings because the same rules apply to everyone regardless of racial background (Dattel, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021).

This perception is that having the same rules eliminates inequities which in turn eliminates racial biases. Another theme of CRT is that the concepts of race and races are, “not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9).

The concept of significant racial differences and of races in general is based on very superficial factors. “People with common origins share certain physical traits, of
course, such as skin color, physique, and hair texture. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9).

CRT does not identify racism solely as an intentional act of discrimination or an action that belittles people of color (Dattel, 2017). While these are examples of racism, CRT contends much racial inequity is unintended (Dattel, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021).

The use of CRT in an approach to research and analysis reveals problems in current educational practices (Dattel, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These issues include discipline policies that disproportionately impact students of color (Dattel, 2017; George, 2021).

2.2 Participants and Data Collection

Individuals at every level of education were consulted for their perspective on the use of exclusionary discipline in the district. They were free to share personal opinions, lived experiences, and assessment of the district policies and procedures. The personnel involved in this study were members of executive leadership, elementary and secondary principals, and classroom teachers.

Interviews were conducted with members of the executive leadership team (ELT) in the district. These included interviews with two executive directors utilizing Zoom and one executive director in a Telephone interview. The individuals participating were Executive Director 1, Executive Director 2, and Executive Director 3. The interviewees were each asked 11 questions. The questions and answers were correlated with the four research questions.
A total of five secondary and five elementary principals were interviewed regarding the use of exclusionary discipline in their school buildings. They represented a mix of schools with a 6% or higher Black population. These buildings included schools that are considered neighborhood schools, inner-city schools, and schools with both larger and smaller enrollments. Most of the schools had higher poverty populations, however there were schools with affluent student populations as well. The principals were afforded the opportunity to participate in an in-person interview, through a Zoom interview, or written responses to the provided interview questions. One principal chose the Zoom option, while the others chose to respond in writing.

A survey was sent to all K-12 certified classroom teachers in schools with 6% or higher Black student population. Teachers answered 13 survey questions and indicated a desire to participate in a focus group by providing their email address for contact. A consent document was provided. The district statistics department distributed the Qualtrics survey to the teachers via email with two reminder emails on behalf of the researcher.

The elementary focus group was comprised of five certified elementary teachers, three of whom are grade level classroom teachers and two specialty teachers. One of the specialty teachers was a music teacher who represented two of the buildings in the study. The other specialty teacher was a reading interventionist who had also recently served as a grade level teacher. Collectively, the teachers serve in four different schools and teach varying grade levels. The group met via Zoom.

The purpose of the secondary focus group was to ascertain the perceptions and opinions of educators at the secondary school level in the district. There were three
teachers in the group. Each teacher was in a different secondary school in the district and it included both high school and middle school teachers. The focus group met on Zoom.

The responses of these educators were then applied to the four research questions. There were comments and observations that were relevant to each of the four questions. While there were varying opinions provided, each provided insight into the educators’ perspectives as well as, ascertaining how aware each respondent was with the district record regarding the equitable use of exclusionary discipline.

The study examined the use of exclusionary discipline over a period of three years to determine if there has been a change in its use. Data was collected and artifacts related to the topic of school discipline were obtained. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out the advantage to using documents as a source of data due to their stability and objectivity. The artifacts used included data documents obtained from the district, the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the most recent United States census data available, the district handbook, and articles relating to the topic.

The interviews addressed all four research questions and were designed to identify the lived experiences of the participating administrators. “The focus on lived experience accessed through language provides the rationale for taking seriously the words our participants use and following up on them when appropriate” (Seidman, 2019, p.19). These “person-to-person interviews” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108) took place in school buildings or district offices via Zoom or answers to the interview questions were provided by the building principals in written form and sent to the researcher via email. Interviews will be conducted with three SPS executive leaders and ten building principals. The person-to-person interviews lasted no longer than one hour, were audio
recorded to ensure accuracy, and will be retained according to The University of Missouri (MU) research policies.

There were also two focus groups comprised of three to five teachers from throughout the district. Each focus group session was one hour. The purpose of the focus groups was to “uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior, or motivation” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 21). In this research the responses helped determine the behaviors that prompt teachers to use exclusionary discipline and why there is a discrepancy in the racial background of these students. The questions posed to the focus groups were clearly stated, short inquiries. They were open-ended to facilitate responses that required thought and illustration. The focus group discussion addressed all four research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

In addition, a survey was designed and sent to teachers serving in the participating schools. The Likert items addressed each of the four research questions. The results were recorded and presented using descriptive statistics which, “provide simple summaries about the sample and the responses to some or all of the questions” (Fink, 2017, p. 137). This analysis also incorporated a frequency computation which included the number of similar responses given to each item (Fink, 2017). The items and responses to the surveys were recorded using a Likert scale.

2.3 Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the goal of data analysis by stating, “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of data…it is the process of making meaning” (p. 202). Data was collected via artifact and data analysis, recorded interviews and focus
groups transcribed using Otter ai., and field notes from focus groups. This section
described the process for analyzing the data collected.

The researcher used an interview protocol tool and a focus group protocol tool. Following Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) recommendation, the researcher first focused on using open coding to develop categories for analysis of the data. The researcher then transitioned to focused coding where commonalities and differences were identified in order to condense the number of categories or codes. New data was juxtaposed with existing data for comparison and to secure a complete analysis. This process led to the development of specific themes for the study.

The quantitative data was presented through descriptive statistics. These are, “statistics whose function is to describe or indicate several characteristics common to the entire sample” (Mertens, 2020, p. 443). School districts throughout the nation reported the instances of student behavioral infractions and the disciplinary consequences which followed. SPS is no exception. The data in question is annually produced. The researcher used SPS data in reference to research question one. These statistics were analyzed identifying the number of students by racial group receiving exclusionary discipline, the mean and median numbers by school building, and the percentage of students receiving exclusionary discipline by racial group.

3. Findings

3.1 District Documentation Data

An examination of the statistical documentations regarding enrollment and exclusionary disciplinary incidents in the district indicated Black students receive exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than White students. These statistics were
provided by the district statistics department. They provided totals for the last five academic years, 2017-2018 through 2020-2021.

3.1.1 Student population

In the most recent full year (2020-2021) there was an enrollment of almost 25,000 students. Of these students approximately 75% identified as White and approximately 8% identified as Black. The ratio of White students to Black students was approximately nine to one (See figure 5).

Figure 5

Population of Black to White ratio

Note. Information in Figure 5 provided by the district.

3.1.2 Overall incidents

In academic year 2020-2021 there were approximately 1,700 incidents resulting in exclusionary discipline involving Black students and approximately 5,000 involving White students. There were roughly three incidents involving White students for every one incident involving a Black student. There were, however, nine White students for every one Black student. Black students received exclusionary discipline at a higher rate.
than White students. The ratio of White students in ISS or OSS to Black students is inequitable (See figure 6).

Figure 6

Black to White ratio of behavior incidents

Note. Information in Figure 6 provided by the district.

3.1.3 Unique incidents

When unique incidents were examined, a similarly inequitable distribution was found. During the last two academic years, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, approximately one out of every 10 Black students received exclusionary discipline. The ratio for White students was approximately one out of every 20 (See figure 7).
3.1.4 Statistical Analysis

It should be noted that there has been a downward trend in the use of exclusionary discipline for both Black and White students. In academic year 2017-2018 over one third, 36%, of the district’s Black students received exclusionary discipline while the rate for White students was 16%. During the 2020-2021 school year the rate for Black students with exclusionary discipline was 8%, which was double the 4% rate for White students. Even with the reduction in the overall use of exclusionary discipline, the frequency of its use remains higher for Black students than for White students.

3.2 Research Question Data

Responses to the interviews, focus groups, and surveys were analyzed according to each research question. There were many similarities, as well as some differing opinions expressed. The responses were from the executive directors, the building administrators, and the classroom teachers.
The responses were initially categorized by the respondents’ role in the district. This approach recognized that there were different daily activities, responsibilities, and perspectives depending on the individuals’ position. The experiences of a classroom teacher, for example, were not the same as a district-wide executive administrator or even that of a building principal. An overall summation is, however, included for each research question.

3.2.1 According to district administrators and educators, what disparities exist in exclusionary discipline in the district between Black and White students?

This question was designed to allow the researcher to determine if the employees in the district understand the rate of student discipline. The individuals asked were executive directors, building principals, and teachers. Their responses helped the researcher determine the extent of the lack of understanding.

3.2.1.1 Executive directors

Two of the three executive directors interviewed observed that a higher percentage of Black students received exclusionary discipline than White. They also expressed that this was true of students receiving free or reduced cost lunches which indicates they are from low-income families. The executive directors stated children from less privileged home environments were more likely to receive ISS or OSS. Two of the three executive directors stated they believe racial background was a factor in the frequency of exclusionary discipline.

Executive Director 2 stated, “Our Black students are disciplined at a higher rate than White kids are.” Executive Director 1 also observed, “Exclusionary consequences generally affect our minorities at a greater level than our majority students.” They
added that, “sometimes it appears from our data that those students receive higher in-
school suspensions, and conferences, than students in the majority, White or full-pay
students.”

3.2.1.2 Elementary principals

The five elementary principals had varying responses to the inquiry regarding
disparities in school discipline. Most identified a difference based on several factors. However, two did not acknowledge any difference based on any factor in the use of exclusionary discipline.

An examination of the elementary principal responses concerning a disparity in
the racial backgrounds of the students receiving exclusionary discipline revealed some
principals saw little to no racial or ethnic disparities in their buildings. While Principal 1 did not provide any numbers of the students they mentioned in each category they identified, “Students from varying races, genders, socio-economic status, academics and social emotional status have been suspended.” Principal 2 responded to the question by saying, “I feel that we have had the same rate of exclusionary discipline for our racial and ethnic groups that are represented in our school.” They did acknowledge some difference in gender and children with, “social emotional needs.”

The other respondents were far more forthcoming regarding the race and ethnicity of students receiving exclusionary discipline. Principal 3 was very specific and reported 33 incidents of ISS and OSS. They also reported a total of 18 students who received exclusionary discipline. Of these students, 55% were White, 29.5% were Black or mixed-race background, 11% were Hispanic, and 3.5% were Native American. Principal 4 was specific about the students receiving OSS noting there was an equal number of Black
and White students (50%) who had been “suspended” this academic year. However,Principal 4 was not specific regarding ISS. Their observation was most of the students in
his building who received ISS were White males and low income, although there were
minorities in the group as well. Principal 5 stated 64% of the students receiving ISS in
her building were White and 34% were minority students. Regarding OSS, the mix was
75% White and 25% Black.

3.2.1.3 Secondary principals

Four of the five secondary principals acknowledged disparities exist in the
utilizations of exclusionary discipline in the district. There was a difference in the groups
identified as having a disproportionate number of OSS and ISS referrals. All of the
principals, however, expressed a need for equitable use of discipline.

Several of them recognized low-income students were more likely to receive ISS
or OSS. Principal 6 observed younger students received exclusionary discipline at a
higher rate and that there were an approximately an equal number of Black and White
students who received ISS in his school. Principal 7 identified “minority students, low
socio-economic status, males, and special education” as the students who more frequently
receive exclusionary consequences in his building. Principal 8 stated there was a disparity
in the use of suspension, they did not specifically identify racial bias. They mentioned,
“Students who have received exclusionary discipline are typically male and are of low
socio-economic status.” Principal 9 and Principal 10 both stated students from “each
demographic” receive exclusionary discipline, but neither specified numbers or
percentages of any demographic of students receiving discipline.
All of the principals acknowledged a disproportionate percentage of instances of exclusionary discipline for Black students, other minorities, or students from households with lower socio-economic status. However, the principals did not express a feeling that a disparity existed for every group. None of the principals offered suggestions to address the disparities in the use of ISS and OSS.

### 3.2.1.4 Elementary teachers

The five elementary focus group participants agreed two groups of students received a higher rate of exclusionary discipline than other students. They reported most of the students involved were lower socio-economic status and had trauma of various causes. Teacher 1 stated, “I have noticed that the vast majority of our kiddos that are getting OSS or ISS have trauma.” Teacher 2 agreed that many of their students “carry some heavy emotional trauma.” Teacher 1 observed that “every kiddo that is having behavioral issues at school is going to be from a low socio-economic background.” This is at least partly because 89% of the student population at her school qualifies for free or reduced cost school lunches. Teacher 3 echoed those observations for their school. They stated, in describing students who receive exclusionary discipline in her school, “They’re the low socio-economic group and have trauma.”

As noted above, in the experience of the elementary teachers, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are almost exclusive recipients of exclusionary discipline in their schools. The other group they identified were students experiencing personal trauma. It was recognized that in these circumstances, both of these conditions exist simultaneously. They did not identify any disparity based on race or ethnicity. Teacher 4 stated, “I wouldn’t say there’s a specific race of student that is in ISS or in OSS.” She
continued by adding, “I’ve had multiple races involved in ISS and OSS.” An observation related to race was the opinion that some people have a difficult time relating to people unlike themselves. That included race but also could be due to gender differences.

Teacher 5 recalled a time when a teacher took offense at a word that was used. Their thoughts were, however, “because it’s disrespectful to you doesn’t mean that it is disrespectful.” Teacher 5 also observed that the district did not have a sufficient number of minority teachers and the opinion that more should be employed.

3.2.1.5 Secondary teachers

The three secondary focus group participants stated and repeated that the same students seem to be receiving ISS and OSS in their schools. While discussing the recipients of exclusionary discipline, Teacher 6 observed, “Typically, it’s the same folks over and over.” Teacher Seven referred to these students by stating, “We still have those frequent fliers there.” They also observed it is the students from lower income families who tend to receive exclusionary discipline more frequently. Teacher 8 stated, “It’s usually my lower socio-economic kids.”

There was complete agreement that lower socio-economic students were disproportionately given exclusionary discipline. However, the participants reported differing experiences regarding race and ethnicity. Teacher 8 remarked, “We have Black, Hispanic, White, transgender. I don’t see one group being in ISS more than another.” That was not the experience shared by Teacher 7. They reported at their school there had been a history of using exclusionary discipline more with minority students than with White students.
Teacher 7 stated that was still an issue. They said in a recent meeting a topic of concern was “sending our African American kids out at a disproportionate rate based on the amount of African American kids, Hispanic kids, or multiracial kids.” They said they didn’t know if it had improved, but were certain, “they’re more frequent to get suspended.” They later reiterated “our African American kids and Hispanic kids were getting suspended at a much higher rate.” Teacher 8 added in agreement while comparing hypothetical population size, “If we’re 20% Black, 15% Hispanic the suspensions for those students are a greater percentage.”

3.2.1.6 Summation

There were various opinions regarding the first research question. Most of the respondents, depending on their position, did not believe there was a significant disparity in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students. All of the participants reported students from lower income households receive exclusionary discipline at a higher rate. The executive leadership acknowledged there are disparities in the rate of exclusionary discipline between Black and White students as well as between students who fall into a lower socio-economic bracket compared to those from more affluent households.

3.2.2 According to the district administrators and educators, how do the policies and procedures guide the use of exclusionary school discipline between Black and white students in the district?

This question was designed to allow the researcher to determine if the policies and procedures could be contributing to disparities in exclusionary discipline in the district. The individuals asked were executive directors, building principals, and teachers.
Their responses helped the researcher determine if there was a belief from staff that inconsistencies or problems exist within the policies and procedures in the district.

### 3.2.2.1 Executive directors

The consensus opinion of the executive directors is the lack of specificity in the district’s policies can lead to an uneven use of exclusionary discipline. Some infractions receive an automatic suspension, while others are provided a more subjective interpretation according to the *School Handbook* (2021). Moreover, from the executive directors’ perspective, the use of exclusionary discipline varies from school to school.

The executive directors observed an individual teacher’s opinion and reaction to the incident may determine if a referral to administration is given or not. This is because the policy regarding a teacher’s prerogative in assigning referrals, is as stated by Executive Director 2, “ambiguous.” A commonality the executive directors observed is some teachers have a higher tolerance than others for behaviors that are perceived as disruptive. Executive Director 2 said one of the factors that can affect the frequency to refer students is, “their (teachers’) preconceived ideas about the kid, maybe their patience with the kid if a kid continues to struggle.” Executive Director 1 stated, “I think it comes from the mindset of the teachers and how they are responding.” This lack of specificity is in spite of the district handbook which outlines the types of behaviors that could potentially lead to ISS, OSS, or expulsion (District, 2021).

When asked to specify what typically leads to a student receiving exclusionary discipline, the executive directors’ answers reflected a great deal of commonality. All three identified assaultive behavior as the primary cause of administering exclusionary discipline and also identified some behaviors which always lead to in-school-suspension
(ISS) or out-of-school-suspension (OSS). These infractions are bringing weapons to school, possession or distribution of drugs, and may also include threats of assaultive behavior directed at faculty or students.

The loss of instructional time for the students receiving exclusionary discipline as well as their classmates is another concern expressed by the executive leaders. Executive Director 2 emphasized, “you’re actually taking somebody away from their teacher.” When a student is removed from their classroom they obviously miss out on the instruction. The other students also experience a disruption in the learning environment. Executive Director 3 cautioned, “We look at how much instructional time is lost when kids are in in-school suspension or in out-of-school suspension”, They continued to observe that while ensuring safety is the primary concern, the loss of instructional time is also a major concern as well, “We want to make sure that we maximize instructional time.”

3.2.2.2 Elementary principals

The five elementary principals did not identify specific policies that contributed to a disparity in the use of exclusionary discipline. They did, however, acknowledge the use of exclusionary discipline presented both good and adverse effects. The respondents expressed providing a safe environment and loss of instruction are concerns.

Every elementary principal emphasized the need to maintain a safe learning environment for all students. They expressed that on occasion suspending an offending student did result in an improved learning atmosphere for the balance of the class. Principal 4 offered the observation, “For the other students, it allows them to learn in a less traumatic environment.” They added when a student is suspended it is usually the
result of the occurrence of a traumatic incident caused by the student. Principal 5 observed, “Often the removal of a student allows other students to work and focus without the distraction of the student who is misbehaving.” Principal 3 discussed teacher feedback and stated, “The feedback I have received about removal is they felt it made the classroom safer for students.”

There was nearly a unanimous agreement that exclusionary discipline, especially OSS, has a detrimental effect on the student receiving the exclusionary discipline. Principal 5 stated, “Students who are suspended are impacted by a loss of learning.” Principal 2 agreed, “The student that receives the suspension suffers because the learning that takes place from the teacher’s instruction is invaluable and cannot be replaced when they are not in the classroom.” An opinion was expressed that alternative forms of instruction available to suspended students do not compensate for a loss of instruction.

3.2.2.3 Secondary principals

All five of the secondary principals believed that policies were clear for major infractions such as; drugs, physical violence/assaults, weapons, threats of violence, and sexual misconduct. They understood these offenses receive automatic exclusionary discipline as consequences to the behaviors. The answers to this inquiry, however, also reflected a concern regarding areas of imprecise direction the district provides building administrators. Principal 9 stated consequences given to a student, “depend on each situation.” Principal 6 observed there definitely needs to be some autonomy at each building due to the varying needs of each unique student population. To that end, they reported that while there are policies, “within the scope and sequence, there’s an opportunity for discretion.” They also observed, however, there is a problematic concern
within the policies. “We don’t have an official way to define major and minor disciplines.” They added, “that’s not currently a practice within our district.” They summarized by stating, “So, it’s actually super subjective.”

One area of uniform responses is the need to maintain a safe environment. The primary reasons exclusionary discipline is given revolve around the issue of safety. Principal 9 identified “fight, assault, threats of violence, weapons, and drugs” as the initial actions that result in exclusionary discipline. They then added, “repeated disrespect, repeated class disruptions, bullying, sexual harassment, etc.” Principal 8 also referenced “threats of violence, distribution and possession of drugs, assaultive behaviors, fighting, and major disrespect,” as the reason exclusionary discipline is used in their school. Perhaps the statement shared by Principal 7 summarizes the principals’ attitude about safety. They stated, “There are many offenses where there is no choice but to place a student in ISS or OSS.” They referenced assault as an example of an infraction requiring the use of exclusionary discipline. They added, “You want to maintain the perception of a safe building.” In describing exclusionary discipline, Principal 10 stated, “It is not effective in changing behavior, but is necessary for maintaining a safe learning environment for all.”

The loss of instruction due to suspensions was a concern often voiced by the respondents. All of the secondary principals recognized there is initially the disruption caused in the classroom, which negatively impacts the instruction of the class as a whole. Later, however, with the negative input of the disobedient student removed, some respondents reported a smoother and more productive learning environment could commence. The primary concern regarding the loss of instruction time was for the
student being disciplined. Principal 8 stated, “I believe in most instances that the student receiving the discipline is impacted negatively.” They have observed students who are suspended, “frequently become more and more disengaged with school. Data shows those students are more likely to drop out.” Principal 10 stated, “Learning is compromised”, and Principal Six recognized, that in reference to ISS and OSS and the disciplined student, “it’s pretty disruptive to a classroom environment and their own personal learning.”

3.2.2.4 Elementary teachers

The elementary focus group participants discussed tools and policies at their respective schools. Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 5 reported their schools each have a matrix used to identify infractions and the consequences each infraction would generate. Teacher 4 agreed their school has the same type of flowchart. Teacher 2 shared their school uses a flowchart to record behavior issues and events. The respondents also reported the use of a focus room. They explained that the focus room is used for various purposes in each building. They described the focus room as a place for students to reset, or calm down, as well as a room that can be utilized for paraprofessionals to assist in disciplinary situations and ISS. They did not suggest the practices in their schools contributed to a disparity in the use of exclusionary discipline.

They all agreed safety is a key factor in the use of exclusionary discipline. Teacher 4 responded they had been “punched by a student.” Teacher 1 also reported being hit by a student who was also being destructive to their classroom. Destroying and damaging school and student property was also reported by Teacher 3. They stated, “I have had a female student who tore up my classroom.” They added, during that incident
the teacher had to clear the class from the room for their protection. This incident resulted in an ISS placement for the student. Teacher 3 also added that while several of her students had, in previous years, received both ISS and OSS, this year only one had received OSS while several others had been sent to the focus room.

There was agreement from all of the elementary participants that any absence from class can be problematic. There was concern voiced that when students are out of the classroom that learning suffers. There were also other concerns. Teacher 1 said they were not only concerned about the instruction a student misses, but they were also worried that a student who receives OSS would not have anything to eat at home. Teacher 2 expressed the same concerns, that children were missing valuable instruction time.

Teacher 3 also observed when students act out it results in a loss of instruction time for the entire class. Teacher 5 shared that a kindergarten student had repeatedly “completely torn apart that kindergarten classroom.” Obviously, this kind of event significantly impedes the learning occurring in the classroom. After an event where a student is destructive, Teacher 3 reported that additional instructional time is lost simply getting the room back in order. They stated, “It takes a while to pick up books off the floor and clean up after this has happened, so we lost a lot of learning time.” The teachers also mentioned the need to calm the rest of the students after an event like this in order for them to feel safe enough to continue their learning.

3.2.2.5 Secondary teachers

The secondary focus group participants all expressed concern that the decision to refer a student for exclusionary discipline and the decision to assign it were subjective.
Teacher 6 stated, “It all depends on the teacher in the classroom, the relationship, and partly the tolerance you have for certain things.” Teacher 7 added from her perspective, working in different buildings, it is evident the use of ISS and OSS varies from school to school within the district. They reported, “It’s at the discretion of the principal”, The subjectivity was a concern identified by the group and that concern was intensified by what were perceived as inconsistencies in application.

They all shared experiences in which the safety of individuals, both students and faculty, was jeopardized. All of them felt violent behaviors were valid reasons for the use of exclusionary discipline. They each, however, had a sense of remorse when that occurred. Teacher 8 recounted an incident involving a student with a knife accompanied by a verbal threat directed at three other students. There were reports of fist fights, destruction of property, and students being removed from the building in handcuffs by the city police.

Teacher 7 stated in the incident involving the city police, the student had been involved in multiple incidents previously. Teacher 6 stated, “Sometimes you just have to have somebody out”, in discussing behaviors that become threatening and violent. Teacher 8 also reported theft of their phone and an instance in which they were intervening to separate two students who were fighting and were unintentionally kicked in the process. Teacher 8 shared their perspective on exclusionary discipline is, “It doesn’t work as far as education is concerned.” They then observed, “It works because we have to be able to remove students that are a danger.” They added, “I can’t put my other kids in danger.” All of the participants in the group concurred with Teacher 8.
The secondary teachers in the focus group all reported ISS and OSS as having detrimental effects on student learning. Teacher 7 stated in ISS there is, “no instruction going on, just supervision.” Describing ISS in their building, Teacher 8 remarked, “I definitely wish we could change it.” They reported there is no instruction provided in ISS. Moreover, there have been as many as 24 students assigned to ISS at one time in their building. The room used for IS accommodates only 12, so some students are sent to the auditorium which further removes them from learning resources. They observed that the separation from teachers and learning resources, “is definitely hindering their education.” Teacher 6 observed while the student given suspension suffers, having the student in the classroom can also be problematic. While discussing student classroom disruptions, they stated, “It’s not fair to the rest of the kids.” Teacher 8 agreed and added, “Instruction in my class, last semester, definitely suffered because I had some very violent students that we just kept trying to put back in class.” The situation is negative for all concerned, both the student who receives exclusionary discipline and the students whose learning is compromised by the distractions and interruptions.

3.2.2.6 Summation

Respondents at each professional level agreed the district policies regarding exclusionary discipline are imprecise. They frequently used terms like “subjective” and “inconsistent” to describe the policies. Among the concerns expressed were the variances from building to building, grade level to grade level, and classroom to classroom. They felt a great deal of discretion was left to each building administrator. Some did not, however, feel this was necessarily a bad quality in the policies as buildings serve different populations.
3.2.3 According to district administrators and educators, what are the identifiable, systemic causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline between Black and White students in the district?

This question was designed to allow the researcher to determine if there are systemic issues that contribute to the disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline. The individuals asked were executive directors, building principals, and teachers. Their responses helped the researcher determine if there are systemic causes and what they may be.

3.2.3.1 Executive directors

The discussion of research question three leads to an analysis of why the disparity of application of exclusionary discipline exists. There was a consensus that home environment was a factor in the students’ behavior. There was also, however, a reoccurring reference to the teachers’ ability to relate to students whose racial and cultural background was different than their own.

The executive directors provided their perspectives on why the disparity in the use of exclusionary discipline exists. Executive Director 1 observed, “Most of our teachers are middle class, educated, and White.” They further observed, “With the students that are coming from poverty, that are coming from minority Black or Brown homes, they do not share the same experiences.” This response from Executive Director 1 establishes a cause and effect relationship which addresses the disparity in the exclusionary discipline experiences of Black and White students in the district. Executive Director 1 summarized this observation by stating, “We don’t understand their culture, their standards, their values.”
Executive Director 2 also observed that ethnicity plays a role in teachers’ reaction to student behavior. Executive Director 2 stated, “You cannot say that a kid’s ethnicity is not impacting their discipline, when you look at our data.” They continued by concluding, “Black students receive discipline, and for sure loss of instruction, at a higher rate than White kids do.” Executive Director 1 stated in the district the faculty is, “pretty homogeneous.” They observed, in reference to many teachers’ relationships with minority students, “We haven’t really walked in their shoes and lived their lives as much as we want to believe we have.”

3.2.3.2 Elementary principals

The elementary principals offered an analysis of the reasons disparities may exist in the district. Their perspectives were directed at the teachers and conditions in their specific schools. There was an acknowledgement that conditions and circumstances may vary from building to building.

The actions and reactions of the teachers was identified as the primary factor in discipline, and therefore the source of any disparity that may exist. Principal 3 observed that, aside from safety issues, exclusionary discipline could be attributed to “teachers with a shorter fuse.” Similarly, Principal 4 identified “teacher ability to manage behaviors” as well as “teacher tolerance for behaviors” as the first two factors in referring a student to administration for misbehaviors.

3.2.3.3 Secondary principals

The secondary principals were aware of disparities in exclusionary discipline. They recognized it presented a concern, and had suggestions explaining this situation. They also identified some reasons discipline can seem to be inconsistent.
The secondary principals commented on the subjectivity of many disciplinary decisions. Principal 6 observed the handbook offers the teachers and principals a wider range of disciplinary options than it once did. They stated, “All discipline is super subjective when you’re handling it. It just is very subjective.” Principal 8 shared a concern for the lack of specificity. They stated, “I believe one factor that influences the tendency to refer a student for discipline is the teacher’s mindset or perspective of discipline.” They then expanded on that statement and added, “Teachers who view discipline through the restorative lens rather than the punitive lens tend to refer students for discipline less frequently.” Children who develop a reputation as a difficult student could also experience closer scrutiny. Principal 7 stated, from a hypothetical teacher perspective, “Once I’ve written you a referral before, the next referrals are quicker to follow.” Many of the secondary principals believed that for most teachers in their building, writing a referral on a student for behavior was a last resort and that the majority of their teachers want to maintain positive relationships with their students through communication and making connections.

3.2.3.4 Elementary teachers

The elementary participants did report that in their experiences, some teachers had a much more orderly class than others. Teacher 2 recognized that teachers in Title One schools choose to be there and take pride in helping children who have fewer resources than some more affluent children. However, there are times when some teachers take the inappropriate behaviors of and expressions of frustrations from students personally. They observed, “You can tell they’re not in the right environment.” This was the only reference
to systemic problems observed, “that some teachers were assigned to schools that were not appropriate for them.”

The elementary participants discussed the importance of relationships between leaders and their students at length. It was in these discussions that racial differences and potential difficulties were voiced. Teacher 5 observed, “I feel like there’s not enough connection with some of our minority students.” They additionally suggested the district needed to employ more minority teachers. They also offered the opinion that, “I just don’t think that they (teachers) have enough background information about the students.” They added, “I think that the teachers sometimes are just projecting some of their own ideas or biases.”

There are challenges in all schools, but they seem to be especially prevalent in Title One schools. Teacher 2 observed many teachers are “big on building relationships, which is awesome, and that you also understand the culture that you’re teaching in.” They continued by observing that teachers who choose to teach in Title One schools with an enrollment of predominantly lower socio-economic students are there because “their heart is there.” They continued by observing “they enjoy the challenge that these kids bring.”

3.2.3.5 Secondary teachers

The primary cause of disparities in discipline is a combination of teachers’ frustration and the relationship some have with their students. The frustration stems from having less than appropriate resources for the challenges they encounter. The relationship issue is due to teachers who do not have the patience or expertise to deal with students from difficult environments.
The consensus opinion of the participants in the secondary teacher focus group was that a great deal of the success in a classroom should be credited to the teacher. They recognized, however, other factors such as parental support, access to life enriching activities, and a stable and non-threatening environment contribute to the success as well. Conversely, while the teacher may be a contributing factor when there are less than successful experiences, there typically are many other issues. The participants believed the child’s home environment, as well as the opinions and perceptions of education the adults in the child’s life have, are potential barriers or bridges to a positive learning experience. The child’s feelings about school and their relationships with the adults at school are critical factors in determining the student’s success.

The participants observed when students are facing difficult situations outside of school, it can have a negative impact on their education. Teacher 8 stated, “I also know that with the things that my students are going through on a daily basis, their education, is not even a concern of theirs.” They elaborated by identifying, “surviving, eating, having a place to sleep, not being abused”, are examples of the distractions from school students encounter. Teacher 6 added in their experience some students, “don’t even have a home, and they worry about food.” With this kind of challenge, it takes a teacher who has empathy and patience.

Teacher 6 observed, “tolerance” was necessary, but lacking, in some faculty members. Teacher 8 also implied some teachers have limited patience. Teacher 6 was complimentary of the teacher who is in charge of the ISS room in their school. That, however, was not always the case. The experience of Teacher 8 with the ISS counterpart at their school was not positive. They stated, “There is no teaching going on.”
Perhaps a statement by Teacher 7 regarding relationships summarizes the concerns voiced by the participants. They said, “It all depends on the relationship with the teacher and the administrator.” Teacher 8 shared deeply feelings of empathy for their students when they are not successful. They confessed, “I feel like it just breaks my heart.” They shared one of their solutions in these circumstances by stating, “I can just show them that I love them.” This statement illustrates how important these teachers felt empathy and tolerance are in challenging educational environments. This focus group concurred that relationships between the teacher and student are a critical factor and need additional attention from the district. They did not, however, identify improper teacher placement with as much significance as their elementary level colleagues did.

3.2.3.6 Summation

The primary cause of inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline were identified as staff members’ lack of appreciation for cultural and ethnic differences. Frequently, respondents noted the staff at the district were largely White, educated, middle-class professionals. Some of the participants understood there are employees within the district who do not identify with individuals who are different from themselves. They may see actions or behaviors as disrespectful or defiant when, in fact, those actions or behaviors would not be interpreted as such in the students’ own culture or home.

3.2.4 According to district administrators and educators, in what ways can the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline be reduced between Black and White students in the district?
This question was designed to allow the researcher to elicit opinions regarding potential improvements to discipline policies and procedures. The individuals asked were executive directors, building principals, and teachers. Their responses allowed the researcher to gather suggestions that may help to contribute positively to students’ behaviors and discipline incidents.

3.2.4.1 Executive directors

The obvious next step is to identify alternative actions that can help improve this situation. There are some specific alternatives that can be utilized. This is also a realization that the problem is systemic and will necessitate some changes in the adults’ attitudes toward students and their understanding of students.

The executive directors had suggestions for alternative responses. Executive Director 3 suggested, “Twilight School” in the late afternoon and early evening. Executive Director 3 explained in an example, “For a kid who was extremely disruptive, they will be assigned to five days of twilight school.” This type of alternative would allow students the opportunity to have direct contact with school personnel as well as not lose any attendance hours for the time missed in the regular school day. In addition, it would allow the student to have access to more direct help with instruction, therefore having less loss of instruction time. The same approach would be used for students assigned to Saturday school. Executive Director 3 also suggested offending students could, “help do some clean-up projects and things like that in lieu of being suspended.”

Executive Director 1 emphasized training and orientation for teachers is critical. They stated, “Unless we have a personal relationship with our students, we’re going to see disruptive behaviors that might lead to exclusionary type discipline.” Executive
Director 1 added, “It’s the adults’ lack of awareness of those (students’ backgrounds), and really knowing them, and learning their culture, and identifying with them.” The executive directors also believed in teaching students coping skills to help them deal with frustrations and poor choices. Executive Director 2 mentioned, “trying to implement restorative justice type practices in those areas, ensuring that the kid understands what he or she’s done, trying to right the wrong.”

Executive Director 1 gave an example of a three-step process to teach a child how to communicate their needs. Step one is, “Instead of shouting at me, I want you to take a big breath.” They continued with step two, “Think of the words that you want to say.” The last step was to tell the child, “Calmly, and without shouting, ask your question.” Executive Director 1 explained that as adults, “We have to be explicit in order to teach children implicit behaviors.”

3.2.4.2 Elementary principals

The elementary principals had a few suggestions regarding options to reduce discipline disparities at the district. The respondents focused on changing the possible perceptions and actions of all persons concerned; the student, school personnel, and those people in the child’s home environment. It was acknowledged this will be a process that will take time, as well as patience, and cooperation by all parties involved.

All of the respondents’ primary focuses were on the behavioral growth of the student through positive rather than punitive options. Principal 2 suggested hiring behavioral technicians to sit with a misbehaving student, or placing them in another classroom might be a more effective option. Counseling was also frequently suggested as a possible positive step to improving behaviors. Principal 4 stated, “Appropriate
behaviors must be taught.” Principal 3 mirrored this statement when they commented there needed to be, “more proactive practices to give students tools they need to communicate their frustrations.” Many principals provided comments regarding how important parents are in the process of developing proper responses and behaviors. Principal 5 even suggested establishing parenting classes could be beneficial, “to help parents create schedules, boundaries, and appropriate responsibilities in the home.”

3.2.4.3 Secondary principals

The secondary principals generally had an adverse opinion of exclusionary discipline. All shared they dealt with behavioral issues daily, and all felt the same about exclusionary discipline – it is not good, but it is necessary. Comments illustrating this sentiment came from Principal 8, “In most cases it has more of a negative impact on students”, and Principal 7, “It’s kind of a necessary evil.”

There was some commonality in the comments concerning alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Principal 6 advocated for conferring with others before making a decision regarding exclusionary discipline. They observed that the consequences for misbehavior should be similar at each of the district’s five high schools. Principal 6 was in favor of the implementation of restorative practices. They stated, “The best alternative is usually being very proactive”, and mentioned the possible use of Conscious Discipline practices. Other respondents had similar suggestions as well. Principal 8, for example, was also an advocate for the “restorative practices in Conscious Discipline.” Restorative conferences were also referenced by Principal 7 along with classroom meetings. Principal 10 suggested expanding mental health resources. They stated, “Mental health services for students who continually have behavioral outbursts are also needed.” They also discussed
utilizing “online components to negate missed instruction.” Principal 10 suggested, “Programs that specifically address behavior issues could possibly be helpful.” They also added, “School-wide approaches such as restorative discipline and PBIS can be helpful.” While these suggestions were all related to disciplinary procedures, in theory, none were specific steps a teacher or administrator could employ immediately after an instance of misbehavior.

3.2.4.4 Elementary teachers

Other than students experiencing poverty and students experiencing trauma, none of the elementary teachers stated a disparity in discipline exists in the district. They did emphasize that the faculty in their schools should be equipped to deal with students who may be unlike themselves. They all endorsed the statement Teacher 2 shared that successful teachers in Title One schools, “enjoy the reward, feeling like you’re doing something that maybe no other adult can do.”

All of the elementary focus group participants emphasized the need for additional training for faculty and staff. That training needs to help teachers “connect with minority students”, stated Teacher 1. They added, “There needs to be more training for teachers and more coaching for teachers.” Teacher 2 and Teacher 5 agreed. Teacher 1 also mentioned, “Teachers don’t receive the training and coaching they need with classroom management, with Conscious Discipline, with some of the initiatives we have in our buildings with PBIS.” They all believed additional teacher training could lead to more success in the classrooms. Some additional suggestions included giving teachers in more difficult schools extra compensation and additional resources for those schools. Teacher 3 observed that the principal and school counselor were in a position to help build positive
relationships between teachers and students. There was a consensus that teachers needed more support from the district and school administration. They did not, however, suggest any specific new strategies to incorporate any disciplinary policy.

3.2.4.5 Secondary teachers

The three secondary participants believed that in order to reduce the disparity in exclusionary discipline, the district must take steps to ensure the sensitivity of staff at every level of education. They felt it would take more than just a single instance of professional development. They realized there might be an additional need for funding, which could be a limitation.

The focus group was faced with the conundrum of disliking exclusionary discipline and feeling it often does not accomplish anything, but recognizing that at times, there is no other option. Teacher 6 simply stated, “I don’t think it’s meaningful.” Teacher 8 resigned, “There just becomes a point some of them will have to have OSS.”

In fact, they voiced an opinion that exclusionary discipline often creates problematic situations for the child receiving the discipline. For example, Teacher 6 referenced students, “having to go home and not have a house or food or get beat.” At the same time, they acknowledged that teaching is impaired when students are violent or disruptive. Relating their experience with a student, Teacher 8 shared, “We finally had to remove and put him into an alternative classroom setting because he was just ruining it for everyone”.

This focus group seemed to be at a loss for any other suggestions to address the issue of exclusionary discipline, or any disparities involving exclusionary discipline. Teacher 6 did suggest students, “need more individualized attention.” They expressed,
“When we have invested so much into certain kids in particular, it feels like it’s one step forward and 20 back.”

3.2.4.6 Summation

There was consensus that there is a need for change and progress. The belief was the district needs to develop plans for taking a restorative approach versus punitive reactions to student behaviors. There was also a call for increased training with an emphasis on developing sensitivity to all individuals. The majority believed taking a more proactive approach by implementing practices including PBIS, Restorative Justice, and Cognitive Discipline into daily school life would have beneficial impacts on student behaviors.

3.3 Survey Analysis

The Qualtrics survey was designed to assess the opinions of educators in the selected buildings regarding their perception of how equitably resources are available and exclusionary discipline is administered in their school. The analysis initially reviewed each of the items presented and then focused on those responses related to exclusionary discipline. The Survey employed a Likert Scale with respondents choosing from six options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Surveys were distributed through the district statistics department to every certified classroom teacher who is teaching in a school with at least six percent Black enrollment. Over 10% of these individuals responded to the survey. There were 60 elementary respondents and 41 secondary respondents.

The first four survey items provided an understanding of how successfully the teachers felt their school was offering opportunities and resources to all students. The
survey indicated teachers in the district felt opportunities are equally available to all students, with over 80% answering favorably (see table 1). Items five through eight concerned disciplinary practices. The items ranged from overall discipline to more specific issues. The items concerned gender, age, racial background, and socio-economic level.

Respondents all believed exclusionary discipline is equitably applied, with the exception of age differences (see table 1). It is appropriate to note, while the majority favorable opinion was substantial (over 60% except for the age of student), it was not as large as the overall satisfaction favorability. Items 9 and 10 compared specifically Black and White students' experiences with exclusionary discipline. The majority of respondents (70%) also felt, incorrectly, that Black and White students receive exclusionary discipline at the same frequency (see table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Survey Responses to Likert Items 1-10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Education</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>12 (12%)</td>
<td>43 (42%)</td>
<td>30 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Extracurricular</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>10 (10%)</td>
<td>18 (18%)</td>
<td>22 (22%)</td>
<td>40 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Counseling</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>8 (8%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>18 (18%)</td>
<td>28 (28%)</td>
<td>37 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Special Needs</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>7 (7%)</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
<td>34 (34%)</td>
<td>30 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Discipline</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
<td>20 (20%)</td>
<td>18 (18%)</td>
<td>26 (26%)</td>
<td>22 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Automatic</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>11 (11%)</td>
<td>42 (42%)</td>
<td>43 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.Gender</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>19 (19%)</td>
<td>17 (17%)</td>
<td>14 (14%)</td>
<td>41 (40%)</td>
<td>8 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.Age</td>
<td>7 (7%)</td>
<td>32 (32%)</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
<td>20 (20%)</td>
<td>14 (14%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.Black to White</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>17 (17%)</td>
<td>13 (13%)</td>
<td>11 (11%)</td>
<td>38 (37%)</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.Black</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
<td>31 (31%)</td>
<td>20 (20%)</td>
<td>13 (13%)</td>
<td>15 (15%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 102 for items 1-4, 7, 9, 10, N = 101 for items 5 and 6, N = 100 for item 8
4. Summary of Study

The study provided an analysis of the underlying causes of inequitable exclusionary disciplinary treatment of students based on race. This problem was especially evident in an examination of the frequency of incidents resulting in exclusionary discipline experienced by Black students. This study additionally revealed that disciplinary disparities have been identified nationwide. It confirmed that when inequities exist in the treatment of students, especially in the use of disciplinary consequences, that negative outcomes may result. Furthermore, it demonstrated how these inequities can occur unintentionally and with no overt malice involved.

This study then focused on the district and the statistics the district has compiled. It revealed the propensity of inequitable treatment found throughout the country is also evident in the district. A specific analysis of the disparities identified the extent of the problem, offered the opinions and reactions of personnel, and provided an understanding of how well personnel recognized the existence of disciplinary inequities. The feedback came from classroom teachers, building administrators, and district-wide administrative personnel.

This study identified current measures being taken by the district, juxtaposed with the current data. It identified suggestions for immediate action and longer-term changes. The study is useful for the district as a baseline from which to measure progress and provides the impetus for studies at other districts.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is an equitable use of exclusionary discipline in the district as it relates to Black and White students who
receive exclusionary discipline. If a disparity exists, the next concern is to determine if the personnel in the district are aware of this situation. In addition, a determination should be made to ascertain if the inequity is the product of a systemic condition.

5.1 Determinations

The researcher determined that there is a significant inequity of exclusionary discipline within the district. Black students are twice as likely to receive exclusionary discipline as are White students (The District, 2021). Moreover, many of the district teachers and administrators do not perceive this inequity exists. Many school personnel observed that the district leaves decisions regarding exclusionary discipline to the teachers and administrators at each individual school. Comments to this effect included phrasing such as, “depends on each situation,” “super subjective,” and “ambiguous.” Considering the imbalance in the use of exclusionary discipline, the imprecise direction provided, and the lack of recognition by many district personnel, it is possible to conclude that a systemic problem exists. The statistics provided through the district verified that during the last two academic years, one out of every 10 Black students received exclusionary discipline, while only one out of every 20 White students experienced exclusionary discipline.

The majority of the teachers and administrators in the district indicated they are not in favor of the use of exclusionary discipline, unless absolutely necessary, due to the adverse effects they feel it may cause. Their concerns are warranted. The use of exclusionary discipline has been questioned by several researchers (Fenning et al., 2012; Ridder & Anderson, 2018; Sharkey & Fenning, 2012; Whitford et al., 2019). Exclusionary discipline can have negative short-term effects and long-term implications
as well (Whitford et al., 2019). A typical analysis of exclusionary discipline is offered by Sharkey and Fenning, 2021, “Long-standing research consistently documents the negative impact of suspension as a disciplinary tactic” (p.96).

5.2 Implications

The inequitable use of exclusionary discipline is not unique to the district. There are several examples which confirm exclusionary discipline is more frequently used as a consequence of misbehavior for Black students than for White throughout the nation (Brown & DiTillio, 2013; Losen et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014; Whitford et al, 2019). That this inequity is evident at all levels of elementary and secondary education was confirmed by Butler et al. (2012), Copolan and Nelson (2019), Martin et al. (2016). The product of this research which confirms inequity in the district relative to the use of exclusionary discipline can be a model for other districts. This research will assist other districts to examine their own use of exclusionary discipline. In addition, this research can assist the district to identify problematic issues with the use of exclusionary discipline. The research can be a catalyst for addressing the inequities shown to exist and in creating awareness of the potentially negative results from the use of exclusionary discipline.

5.3 Recommendations

The researcher offers three recommendations. First, the district should intensify its efforts to sensitize all employees regarding the cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender differences that exist in our community, and how those differences may affect actions, reactions, and interpretations of behaviors and communication. Secondly, the district should examine the directions offered to faculty regarding the use of exclusionary
discipline in an effort to provide more specific guidance to administrators in the decision to use exclusionary discipline. Finally, the district should inform all staff personnel that an imbalance in the use of exclusionary discipline does, in fact, exist in our schools, and encourage all staff to be more sensitive to this issue.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

There were three potential limitations encountered in the course of this study. First, according to the statistics department at the district, there are several students who transfer in and out of the district throughout the academic year. In fact, while at any given time there are approximately 24,500 students enrolled, during the course of the year as many as 32,000 individual students will be enrolled in the district. All exclusionary discipline events are identified, recorded, and reported. However, some of those students who received exclusionary discipline were not counted in the annual enrollment statistics reported to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education because they were no longer enrolled in the district at the time of the reporting.

Secondly, although an invitation was extended, no personnel from the district Equity and Diversity Department were available to participate in this study. Finally, the district made several accommodations in typical practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The district recorded a significant reduction in the number of exclusionary discipline instances in academic years, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. For the entire fourth quarter of the 2019-2020 school year, the district ceased all in-person learning and utilized remote learning alternatives. This obviously reduced the potential for disciplinary actions that would have occurred during the months of March, April, and May of that year.
To begin the 2020-2021 school year, the district adopted a policy of having only one half of the students in the school buildings at a time, with no students in the buildings one day a week. After the first quarter of that year, all students returned to the buildings together for four days a week rather than five. Fewer students in the buildings lessened the potential for disciplinary actions to take place. By going to school only four days a week rather than five, there was one less day of possible discipline incidents to occur. Additionally, several families chose an alternative method of education as opposed to returning to the public schools due to the fear of COVID-19 exposure or other personal reasons possibly related to the pandemic. This resulted in an overall reduction in school enrollment.

In the schools that were studied there is a trend of high poverty and trauma in the populations. It would be appropriate to expand or further this research to examine the disparities of exclusionary discipline in students who have faced trauma as well as students who live in poverty. That possibility was suggested in the interviews and discussions that were conducted.
Section Six

Self-Reflection
Self-Analysis

The act of developing and implementing the process of writing a dissertation has been simultaneously challenging, exhilarating, and perhaps most importantly, enlightening. The dissertation process has influenced my practice as an educational leader. Additionally, the dissertation has also had a significant influence on my approach as an active scholar. The ways these practical applications have influenced my daily strategies in my professional life will be examined in the following analysis.

The dissertation experience began with a self-examination of what is important to me as an individual. I had to decide what issue or situation was so significant that I was willing to invest the hours of research and writing required to complete a dissertation. This exercise is consistent with what Merriam and Bierema (2014) describe in their description of motivation. “Motivation is the drive and energy we put into accomplishing something we want to do. We cannot see or touch it, but it is ever present in our thoughts and actions” (Merriam and Bierema, 2014, p. 147). I have applied this realization to my activities as a scholar and researcher. While I have always been an active learner, the dissertation has helped me learn to focus my efforts and make the time I invest in self-improvement and research more valuable. This awareness was the catalyst for much productive thought and evaluation, and ultimately led to choosing my topic - one I feel is not only of interest to me, but potentially a significant contribution to others.

Research Traits and Strengths

The next step was to research the topic. This process necessitated not only researching, but capitalizing on my data collection skills and being proactive by securing feedback and cooperation from others. These skills were consistent with the leadership
traits I possess and helped me enhance these qualities. I needed to employ my “achiever” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 103) quality. I have always possessed a strong work ethic which has been underscored through the dissertation process. I embrace the importance of the task at hand and proceed to create goals and procedures to accomplish that task. Certainly, the dissertation process has required the emphasis on achievement. The rigor and intense, focused research I have experienced as a doctoral student has sharpened my scholarship and research skills. This observation correlates with how the dissertation has influenced me as a scholar and researcher.

My leadership strengths identified through Strengths Finder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) also included intellection and the ability to be decisive. The first of these causes an active mind to constantly pursue new information. A phrase used by Rath and Conchie (2008) is, “Your mind is like a sponge” (p. 192), a quality is certainly utilized and enhanced through the dissertation process. I also am capable of being decisive, and that too is an invaluable quality in cumulating and assessing information. Indeed, the inability to be decisive is a persistent problem in many organizations. Charon (2013) observes “The inability to take decisive action is rooted in the corporate culture” (p. 58). Through my research I have learned the need for decisive action in many situations requires a strong leader. Charon (2013) puts it best when they state, “Breaking a culture of indecision requires a leader who can engender intellectual honesty and trust in connection between people” (p. 59). My proclivity for active, and when warranted, decisive leadership has also made me receptive to change. Merriam and Bierema (2014) observe, “Change is a major catalyst for learning in all cultures” (p. 252). My dissertation topic and the
experience of pursuing its completion have emphasized that change is a necessary component of my personal growth and improvement.

**Transformative Learning**

The dissertation process requires the scholar to incorporate the elements of transformative learning. This begins with combining the knowledge and experience the scholar has acquired with the new and heightened knowledge and awareness they acquire. Certainly, the dissertation process not only does this, but additionally causes the learner to question current practices, reassess one's assumptions, and actively involve oneself in dialogue with others. These are all incorporated into transformative learning (Taylor, 2009). Transformative learning also emphasizes the unique characteristics and backgrounds individuals bring to any learning process (Megaio et al., 2009; Taylor, 2009).

My experience with the dissertation process in general and my topic specifically, has heightened my sensitivity to each individual’s qualities, differences, and unique traits. Each of us is a product of environmental orientations. They are certainly not all the same and my dissertation research has underscored the need to be sensitive to each person and their background. Understanding that each individual has the potential to bring new information or new insight to any aspect of human interaction, represents a significant growth in perception. This realization is especially important in the relationship between teacher and student which is a critical part of my dissertation.

**Appreciating Organizational Structure**

The next area in which my dissertation experience has led to personal growth is understanding the corporate structure and dynamics of organizations. One must
understand a corporation to be able to effectively impact it. Organizations are comprised of people with common goals. This manifests itself as, “shared values, beliefs, and norms” (Levi, 2017, p. 289). Appreciation of this commonality in an organization has been instrumental in my recognizing organizational strengths and areas where attention and change are warranted. This skill has had an impact on my practice as an educational leader. By becoming more familiar with my district and its personnel, I have been able to more closely identify strengths and weaknesses. It is an appropriate goal to explore and skill to have as a leader. The dissertation process has helped me to better identify areas of potential improvement for our district. I am also more able to direct my efforts as an administrator and more effectively implement changes.

Schools are comprised of people who have chosen to make their life's work the edification and enrichment of others. These people are unquestionably well intentioned. They are, however, a product of their experiences and cultural conditioning which can lead to automatic predispositions that are not in harmony with the experience and expectations of some of their students. This awareness has become more apparent for me through my dissertation process.

Having a strong understanding of organizations, both in general and in specific instances, is critical to becoming an effective member of any organization and is critical when assuming a leadership role. This is as true of schools as it is of other organizations. “Rules, policies, standards and standard operating procedures are developed to ensure that individual behavior is predictable and consistent” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 56). This structure is necessary in schools. In that regard, schools are not unique. Bolman and Deal (2017) continue by observing, “Rules and policies govern conditions of work and
specify standard ways of completing tasks, handling personal issues, and relating to customers and others” (p. 56). At the same time, schools often include people with varying cultural backgrounds. Moreover, schools are also places where creativity, intellectual exploration, and innovation are valued and nurtured. My dissertation experience has caused me to appreciate the need for the structure while recognizing the necessity of removing any barriers inhibiting inquisitive thinking. This is a daunting task. In my experience, it can be most effectively accomplished when all the participants value each other and have a respect for the experiences each brings to the school setting. Tierney (2005) expresses the possibility that an organization can foster creativity and expression in all those participating in the organization. This is an apt description of a learning environment.

**Appreciating Policy Development**

These are also issues of policy development which impact the performance of schools. My dissertation efforts have helped me understand two essential elements of policy development. First, policy cannot be developed and implemented in a vacuum. Second there are traditions, and internal political issues that have the potential to impact any change or reinterpretation of policy. This reality which Bolman and Deal (2017) describe as the “political frame,” is a phenomenon which exists in any organization. Schools are no exception.

French and Raven (2005) identify five power bases that either a person or a group of people can employ to influence and direct others. The “reward power” (p. 313) describes one party giving benefit or an incentive to another. “Coercive power” (p. 314) is the act of directing a person or group of people to perform a task or conform to a
policy. The term “legitimate power” (p. 315) refers to a situation in which the leader is in a position of authority and can exercise that authority through their accepted position and/or social norms. “Referent power” (p. 316) describes authority that is invested in a leader because of the esteem in which she or he is held. The term “expert power” (p. 317) rather obviously refers to a person who has and exerts authority due to their knowledge.

All of these can be present in an organization. Individuals and groups of individuals can also form coalitions within an organizational structure. I have incorporated this awareness in my role as a supervisor. This can be due to common roles within the organization, or can be driven by agreement on specific issues. There are several examples of instances of groups of parents expressing concern over various aspects of a school's performance (Hess & Lautzenheiser, 2012; Pusser & Marginson, 2004; Ravick, 2014). Organizational culture, as well as varying leadership roles, biases, and prerogatives have become more apparent to me through my dissertation research and analysis.

**Appreciating Data Collection and Utilization**

This brings me to two additional, and in many respects, more prominent areas of increased awareness that are the product of my dissertation efforts. The first of these is an increased appreciation for and a greater ability to use data in scholarly research. I see the role of data retrieval and application as a critical element in scholarly practice and a tool that enriches and expands the learning process. The knowledge of gathering data and then accurately analyzing it is essential in both planning and application. It is also important to recognize that data can be misused through misinformation, misinterpretation, and misapplication.
The successful leader must be cautious not to let a statistic absolve them from their responsibility to ensure its accuracy, understand its relevance to a specific situation, and make certain the action taken incorporates an understanding of the people which the data describes. Perry (2016) placed the burden for initiating data collection, following through on its acquisition, and successful utilization squarely on the leader. Obviously, specific tasks may be performed by other individuals, but the overall responsibility is the leaders. This is an understanding which I had previously realized, but have developed to a much keener extent due to my dissertation process experiences.

Data collection is also more than accumulation of facts and figures. It is essential the leader and their staff be able to correctly understand the data and the implications of the information. There are several ways to facilitate understanding and utilizing data. Becker (2015) identified several effective tools including a flow chart, brainstorming, a spider chart, and a mind map. As a facet of my research, I solicited opinions from faculty and administrators. There were interviews with leaders at the district level, focus groups with teachers in both elementary and secondary schools, and a survey distributed through the district. In many respects all were effective in securing opinions and learning the lived experiences of the respondents.

A key factor in the successful accumulation and application of data is not only that the leader understands they are responsible for ensuring this activity occurs, but that they also will likely need to find other people to actually perform much of the process. There are people who are well equipped to gather and analyze data, and an effective leader should utilize their assistance (Zettlemeyer & Bolling, 2014). Whatever the specific situation, I understand the ultimate responsibility for data collection, analysis,
and role in administrative operation belongs to the leader. Specifically addressing the doctoral program, McGregor and Fellabaum (2016) stated the goal is to, “develop scholarly practitioners who can address problems of practice in policy, program, or educational practice” (p. 62). My experience in the dissertation process has served to increase my awareness of this statement.

**Embracing Diversity**

The overriding need to recognize and embrace diversity is very possibly the most critical area of growth I have experienced during my dissertation process. I have always had an appreciation that people differed from one another, and have known making judgments about people based on superficial and trivial reasons was wrong. Those values have been with me since childhood. But, it was only when researching the potential for culturally based, and often unintended, reactions to other people’s practices and values that I truly realized how pervasive and damaging a disregard for diversity can be. More than simply recognizing that diversity in society exists, it is important to understand that diverse backgrounds and experiences mean individuals have customs and practices that may differ from your own. That, in and of itself, does not make those customs or practices bad - they are simply different. Cultural differences exist in our schools, and these differences affect how we relate to one another (Skrla et al., 2009). In an effort towards fairness, schools have emphasized equal treatment for all students with the assumption this will lead to equal opportunity (Skrla et al., 2009). Equal opportunity requires students are able to exercise their greatest capacity for learning, regardless of their personal circumstances. If that is accomplished, then the learning experience becomes truly equitable.
Often, however, equal means everyone has the same books, access to equipment, and classroom environment. As well intentioned as equal access policies and protocols may be, they alone do not provide a guarantee of equity. The focus on equal treatment, as opposed to equitable treatment, is likely the reason there are differences in frequency of disciplinary actions, attendance, and graduation rates for Black students (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Actions and expressions that may signal an uncooperative or disrespectful attitude to one individual may be routine behavior and normal conversation to another.

There are inequities in the success rates of Black and White students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). For example, there is evidence Black students have lower attendance rates and lower test scores than their White counterparts (London et al., 2016). A very possible reason for this is that people treat those who are unlike them differently than they do people with characteristics like their own (Johnson, 2018). Some people are treated as outsiders by members of groups unlike their own (Johnson, 2018). There are those who act as if diversity doesn't exist, or conversely who act as though everyone ought to be like us (Johnson, 2018). These approaches, whether intentional or not, lead to inequitable treatment of those we see as different. When a student feels they are out of place, are given information that is inconsistent with what they have been taught, are expected to speak in ways that are unlike their usual conversation, and are asked to understand words and terms with which they are unfamiliar, it can lead to a feeling of alienation and an overall discomfort with school. While I was aware those attitudes existed, I am now better informed regarding the extent of this situation and its impact in schools.
Another area of personal growth is the recognition that in many school districts the better prepared and more experienced teachers are placed, perhaps at their request, at schools with higher performance records typically serve more affluent neighborhoods. Teachers who have more knowledge are better prepared to assist their students (Skrla et al., 2009). It can be argued better prepared teachers should be assigned to schools where test scores and performance reports are lower than others. It is believed that teachers should be evaluated based on educational accomplishment, such as degrees, additional training, and years of experience and assigned where they can do the most good (Skrla et al., 2004).

My awareness of inequity and efforts to shed light on this issue are increasing with the development of my dissertation. I am researching my district, as well as others, to get a correct understanding of the equity status. With this information I hope to accurately describe the issues and successfully advocate for measures designed to ensure equitable experiences for all students. It is accurate to observe that it is through the dissertation process I have acquired much of the information and insight I am pleased to be able to bring to any professional circumstance.

Concluding Reflections

Perhaps the dissertation process has influenced me as much as a scholar as in any other way. One of the most significant realizations it has brought me is that everyone has the potential to be a life-long learner. This awareness is consistent with the question regarding my dissertation experience and its influence on my practice as an educational leader. We are surrounded with new information and viewpoints. Having an opportunity is readily available.
What distinguishes an active learner is that they are not content with simply taking advantage of learning new information as it becomes available. The active learner, and especially the educator, must aggressively seek new and expanded knowledge. I must continually apply the research acumen I have acquired while developing my dissertation to new ideas and approaches. While precise practices may vary, I realize the need for in-depth research and academic rigor learned in the process of dissertation development and writing must be an integral part of my examination of each new idea, problem, event, and opportunity every time they arise.
References


Education Policy Analysis Archives. (2021). About the journal. epaa.asu.edu


Appendices
Dear Colleague:

I am writing to request your assistance in my research leading to a doctor of education degree through the University of Missouri and Missouri State University cooperative program. The study is focused on disciplinary policies and practices, specifically exclusionary discipline; in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS). As a key professional, you can provide a great assistance in bringing the educator’s lived experience to the research.

This study will provide the district with valuable information which can be helpful in developing and implementing policy. I know there are sizable demands on your time and I can appreciate any hesitancy to accept an additional task. However, with your experience, you can help ensure that this document accurately reflects the current district status regarding exclusionary discipline. With a correct picture of the present, we can effectively look forward to the future.

Attached you will find an informed consent form which provides a description of individuals’ participation and my commitment to the integrity of the research. I truly appreciate your help. I look forward to you joining me on my journey.

Sincerely,
Margo Griffith
Appendix B
Informed Consent Document

Researcher’s Name(s): Margo Griffith
Researcher’s Contact Information: email

Project Title: An Analysis of Exclusionary Discipline Disparities of Black and White Students

YOU ARE BEING ASKED TO VOLUNTEER TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
You are being asked to participate in a research study. This research is being conducted to help us better understand teachers’ lived experiences of exclusionary discipline. When you are invited to participate in research, you have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent to participation. This form may contain words that you do not know. Please ask the researcher to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

You have the right to know what you will be asked to do so that you can decide whether or not to be in the study. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. You may refuse to be in the study and nothing will happen. If you do not want to continue to be in the study, you may stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

No incentive will be provided to teachers who participate. Teachers are voluntarily participating in the study.

WHY ARE THEY DOING THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this study is to examine the disciplinary practices and identify inequities within those disciplinary practices in SPS.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?
This study will take place over the course of the 2021-2022 academic school year. Participants may complete a brief survey, participate in a 30-45-minute interview, or be asked to participate in a 60-minute focus group.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?
You will be asked to complete a brief survey or participate in a recorded interview. Others may be asked to participate in a recorded focus group.
HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THE STUDY?
There will be approximately 100 people in the study.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?
Your participation will benefit the educational community by providing practice for educational researchers.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?
Your participation in this study is not expected to cause you any risks greater than those encountered in everyday life. However, you may experience feelings of anger, anxiety, or frustration related to your experiences with exclusionary discipline.

Additional Elements of Disclosure: There are no adverse consequences (physical, social, economic, legal, or psychological) of a participant’s decision to withdraw from the research; OR 1) The consent process will disclose the consequences of a participant’s decision to withdraw from the research 2) The consent process will disclose procedures for orderly termination of participation by the participant.

WHAT OTHER OPTIONS ARE THERE?
You also have the option of not participating in this study, and will not be penalized for your decision.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The investigator is required to address how they will maintain the subject’s confidentiality. Your identity and participation will remain confidential.
● Your name and information will not be given to anyone outside of the research team.
● No information or data gathered from this study will be shared outside of the Statewide Doctorate in Educational Leadership Program.
● No information or data gathered from this study will be used for publication purposes.
● Only members of the research team will have access to the data from this study.
● Information and data collected through this study will be stored in a Google Drive folder that only members of the research team have access to.
● Information and data collected from this study will be deleted at the completion of the 2022 school year.

PRIVACY
Participants in the study will be asked to refrain from sharing names and identifiable information of students to protect privacy and avoid FERPA violations.
WILL THE RESEARCHER TELL ME IF SOMETHING CHANGES IN THE STUDY? Informed Consent is an ongoing process that requires communication between the researcher and participants. The participant should comprehend what they are being asked to do so that they can make an informed decision about whether they will participate in the research study. You will be informed of any new information discovered during the course of this study that might influence your health, welfare, or willingness to be in this study.

WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS? Please contact the research team if you have questions about the research. Additionally, you may ask questions, voice concerns or complaints to the research team. Investigator Contact Information:

Margo Griffith

WILL I GET A COPY OF THIS FORM TO TAKE WITH ME? A copy of this Informed Consent form will be given to you before you participate in the research.

SIGNATURES
I am at least 18 years old. I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below means that I do want to be in the study. I know that I can remove myself from the study at any time without any problems.

Your Signature: __________________________ Date: __________________________
Appendix C

Survey

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Slightly Disagree  Slightly Agree  Agree  Strongly Agree

1. Educational opportunities are equitable for all students in our school.

2. Opportunities in extracurricular activities are equally accessible to all students with appropriate interest and ability.

3. All students have access to counseling as needed.

4. Students with special needs are given attention as needed.

5. Student discipline is applied equitably.

6. Some student behavioral infractions should lead to automatic exclusionary discipline.

7. Girls and boys receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency.
8. Younger students and older students receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency.

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Slightly Disagree  Slightly Agree  Agree  Strongly Agree

9. Black and White students receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency.

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Slightly Disagree  Slightly Agree  Agree  Strongly Agree

10. Black students receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) more frequently than White students.

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Slightly Disagree  Slightly Agree  Agree  Strongly Agree

11. Students from all socio-economic backgrounds receive exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) with approximately the same frequency.

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Slightly Disagree  Slightly Agree  Agree  Strongly Agree

12. Exclusionary discipline (ISS or OSS) should be a last resort after other corrective action has been attempted.

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Slightly Disagree  Slightly Agree  Agree  Strongly Agree

13. What level do you teach?

Elementary School  Middle School  High School

13. Are you willing to be a part of a focus group on this topic? If so, please provide your email. _______________________________
Appendix D

Interview Protocol Tool

1. Describe the students who have received exclusionary discipline.

   Specify:
   a. Racial or Ethnic group
   b. Gender
   c. Socio-economic status
   d. Academic background
   e. Social Emotional Status

2. Describe situations that resulted in exclusionary discipline.

3. What specific actions lead to the discipline?

   Follow Up:
   a. What impact did this have on the teacher?
   b. Other students in the class or school?
   c. The classroom instruction?
   d. The teacher’s relationship with the student?

4. What happens when a student returns to class after the discipline?

5. How does suspension impact the learning of the students in the classroom? …the student receiving the discipline?

6. Describe factors that you believe influence the tendency to refer a student for discipline.

   Follow Up:
   a. SPED vs. Regular Education?
   b. Student background/homelife?

7. What is your overall opinion of exclusionary discipline?

8. What alternatives exist for exclusionary discipline?
Appendix E

Focus Group Protocol

Prior to the opening question the researcher will provide a definition of terms. (i.e. exclusionary discipline, race, ethnic group, gender, gender identity, socio-economic status, academic background, social emotional status)

**Opening Question (5 min)**
1. Describe your current role.

**Introductory Questions (10 min)**
2. Tell us about exclusionary discipline in your school.
3. Describe the students who typically receive exclusionary discipline in your school.

Specify:
   a. Racial or Ethnic group
   b. Gender or Gender identity
   c. Socio-economic status
   d. Academic background
   e. Social Emotional Status

**Transition Question (10 min)**
4. Describe a situation with your students that resulted in exclusionary discipline.

**Key Questions**
Keep your experiences with these students in mind as we discuss the next questions.

5. What impact did this have on you personally?
6. What impact did this have on other students in the class?
7. What impact did this have on instruction?
8. What impact did this have on your/the faculty member’s relationship with the student?
9. What impact did this have on the learning of the student who received exclusionary discipline?
10. What changed behaviors, if any, did you observe in the student who received exclusionary discipline when they returned to school?

**Ending Question**
11. What is your overall perspective on exclusionary discipline?
Hi Margaret,

I am happy to inform you that your research request on *An Analysis of Discipline Disparities Between Black and White Students at Springfield Public Schools* has been approved. This approval is conditional in that should your study go to journal publication the confidentiality of Springfield Public Schools (SPS) be protected. You can however use SPS within your dissertation.

Best of luck,

BRIAN OLIVERA  
COORDINATOR OF ACCOUNTABILITY  
Strategic | Learner | Responsibility | Restorative | Relator

SPRINGFIELD R-12
VITA

Margaret Elizabeth “Margo” Griffith has been a classroom teacher and elementary level administrator in the Springfield, MO Public Schools (SPS) for 22 years. She is a graduate of Missouri State University receiving both her Bachelor of Science in Education (BS in Ed) and Master of Science degree in Education (MS in Ed) degrees from the university. She earned her Education Specialist (Ed.S) degree from the University of Missouri, Columbia (MU) and will be awarded her Doctorate in Education from MU this spring. It is no surprise that Margo chose education as her career. She is the fourth generation of educators on both sides of her family. In fact, she represents the fourth successive generation of educators in her family to receive their BS in Ed degree from Missouri State University (MSU). Margo’s mother, grandmother, and great grandmother were all MSU graduates.

Margo’s commitment to her students and their educational opportunities is evident in all her activities. She has taken a leading role in expanding academic and extra-curricular activities and has gone beyond job requirement to assist students with special needs or encountering complicating issues. Her school has seen a substantial improvement in achievement scores and behavior incidents while she has been in the administrator role she currently holds.

Margo is also involved in education related and community activities. She is a member of Delta Zeta sorority and served her chapter as alumnae advisor. She is also a member of Kappa Delta Pi education honorary society. Margo is an active member of the SPS Community Task Force. She has served as an officer in the Springfield, Missouri National Education Association and has volunteered in numerous service and faith-based activities.
Margo is perhaps best described as a consummate educator. Her concern for her students and fellow educators is evident from the first time you meet her. She is robust in her enthusiasm for her job and its potential, and can see a positive element in every situation, every day. She is a loyal and valuable co-worker and encourages and inspires her students and colleagues.