How does Disproportionality in Discipline Manifest in Rural Schools in Southeast Arkansas?

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How does Disproportionality in Discipline Manifest in Rural Schools in Southeast Arkansas?

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

African American students are disciplined in schools at disproportionately higher rates than White students. This trend was first reported in 1975 in a report by the Children’s Defense Fund and since that time, has been highly studied. However, most research has been conducted in urban or suburban schools, with less known about disproportionate discipline in rural schools. This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach to explore disproportionate discipline between African American and White students in five rural schools located in Southeast Arkansas. The research questions were as follows: (1) How is discipline disproportionality perceived in specific rural schools from the principal’s perspective? and (2) What factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality in specific rural schools from the principal’s perspective? Quantitative data consisting of discipline infractions and actions for the 2017-2018 school year were first collected and analyzed to establish if disproportionate discipline was occurring and if so, to what degree. Interviews were then conducted with the principal of each school to further understand their perspectives. Results indicated that African American students were being disciplined at higher rates than White students in all five schools, with one school having significantly lower rates of disproportionality than the others. In answering the research questions, results suggest that these principals have varied perceptions of disproportionate discipline in their schools. The most significant factor causing disproportionate discipline in these schools based on their perspective was a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, followed by student trauma and mental health issues. Based on analysis of data, specific recommendations are made for principal actions and principal preparation programs to better prepare leaders in identifying disproportionate discipline in their schools and effective methods to address it.
Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to all of those who supported my work throughout this journey, including the faculty in the Education Leadership department at the University of Arkansas, my dialogic engagement partners, my coworkers, my family, and my participants. Thank you Dr. Kevin Brady, for serving as my committee chair and for helping me find a way to explore this issue and organize my thoughts. Thank you Dr. Ed Bengston and Dr. Kara Lasater for serving on my committee and pushing me to think beyond the surface level at each point in my study. I want to say a special thank you to my dialogic engagement partners who helped me think through my data analysis. Dr. Tom MacKenzie (Dad), thank you for checking my math and helping me make sense of the quantitative data analysis. You’ve been doing that for me since I first took Algebra many years ago! Dr. Donna Wake, thank you for being my coding partner and for being such a source of encouragement. Your guidance was invaluable in this process. Dr. Dawn Childress, my fellow doctoral cohort member, thank you being a thought partner throughout my study and helping me think through my data. Thank you to my coworkers, Marilyn Johnson, Karen Norton, Rachel Schell, and Candace Smith, who listened to me talk endlessly about my study, cheered me on, and offered feedback. I love working with you each day to support educators in Arkansas! To my parents, Tom and Nancy MacKenzie, thank you for always supporting my endeavors and believing I could do this, even when I didn’t. To my children, Hunter, Ryan, and Libby Grace, thank you for giving me support to complete this study. You have encouraged me when I felt I couldn’t go on, listened to me talk through my data, and given me the time to write without complaining. My final thank you goes to my participants, who choose to go to work each day on the front lines in public schools and fight the good fight. You opened up willingly to me and shared your views, so that together we could find a way to have a deeper impact on students.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Hunter, Ryan, and Libby Grace Workman, who have been my inspiration throughout my career in education. You each have such unique gifts and I am blessed to be your mother. Because of you, I have always worked hard to make things better for those around me and tried to provide an example of how you can reach your goals with hard work. I love all three of you and am so grateful that we shared this journey together.
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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline actions for African American students compared to White students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. Most of the research that has been conducted up to this point has focused on pinpointing causes of disproportionate rates of discipline using large urban or suburban schools (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010). However, considerably less research has been done in rural school communities to determine the influencing factors of rates of disproportionality between White and African American students. This dissertation examined racial disproportionality in discipline in several rural school districts in Southeast Arkansas from the perspective of the principal to determine influences on racial disproportionality in discipline in these schools. The goal of this research was to develop awareness of the impact of these factors on African American students and inform school leaders working in these rural schools toward improved equity in the school disciplinary process for all students.

Problem Statement

The trend of African American students receiving discipline in schools at higher rates than White students is one that has occurred for over four decades (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). Nationally, African American students receive exclusionary discipline, including suspension and expulsion, at a rate of three times as great as White students, which has increased since 1970 (Wald & Losen, 2003). On average, 50% of African American students report that they have experienced suspension or expulsion at least one time in their school career, while only 20% of White students report the same (Wallace et al.,
Suspensions from school result in lost instructional time, putting students at a higher risk for retention, dropping out, and contact with the juvenile court system (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008). The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline infractions and actions for African American students compared to White students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas.

**Focus on Systemic Issues**

An overrepresentation of students of color in disciplinary practices is a systemic issue that is complex in nature. The policies of each school, district, and state guide consequences for disciplinary infractions, but teachers and administrators differ in how they apply those consequences to students within a school or between schools. Individual district and school culture also guides decisions about appropriate consequences, which may be impacted by racial bias at several different points. The culture of the community, perceptions of students and their families, and community history can also impact discipline decisions. This interaction between the norms of the staff with the policies in place in the district creates a multi-layered issue with many facets to explore.

Another layer of complexity is the impact that discipline consequences have on student achievement. When a student is suspended from school, they miss instruction. A lack of instruction often leads to lower achievement for students. In this way, African American students who are already disadvantaged can be further disadvantaged by school discipline systems because of the impact on their educational achievement (APA, 2008).

**Is Directly Observable**

Student discipline outcomes are observable through the school’s discipline data. In the state of Arkansas, the Office of Educational Policy (OEP) compiles and reports school discipline
based on self-reported data from each school in compliance with Act 1329 of 2013. In a report released in September 2018, they found that African American students in Arkansas receive an average of 117.6 discipline infractions per 100 students, whereas white and other race students receive 37 - 40 per 100 students (Anderson, 2018). This indicates that on average, more than one discipline referral per African American student is occurring in the state. African American students in Arkansas also receive higher rates of exclusionary discipline including Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) and In-School-Suspension (ISS) at a rate of 25% of referrals, while White students receive them at a rate of 13.5% (Anderson, 2018). This study also found using data from student and infraction-level data from 2007 – 2017 that students who were engaged in exclusionary discipline in the ninth grade had a lower rate of high school graduation and enrollment in a post-secondary educational program. These statistics indicate that the disproportionate rate of discipline for African American students is prevalent in the state of Arkansas.

Is Actionable

The principal in a school is in a unique role to enact change in their own building and impact student outcomes based on the decisions they make. This problem of practice is actionable because insight gleaned from this study can inform the daily school discipline practices of the administrators involved. By being aware of the impact of their discipline policies and practices on African American students, administrators have the opportunity to make changes. Based on the factors influencing disproportionality sifted from the data, work can begin on crafting school systems that create equitable opportunities for all students. Analysis of recent Arkansas discipline data by the OEP found that the differences in disproportionality by race for students happens between schools in Arkansas and not within schools (Anderson, 2018). This
indicates that as a whole, principals may consistently implement their policies with both African American and White students in their school, but that there are differences in rates of disproportionality for entire schools. This also suggests that there are schools in Arkansas that are not experiencing disproportionate discipline between African American and White students. Identification of these schools and an in-depth look at their discipline policies and practices could provide insight to help all schools take action to provide more equitable experiences for students.

**Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement**

This problem connects to both individual school improvement as well as improvement of the entire system of schools in Arkansas. The High Reliability Schools (HRS) framework by Marzano was endorsed in 2019 by the Arkansas Department of Education as a model for school improvement. The concept of a HRS mirrors that of High Reliability Organizations (HRO) in the business world, which are organizations that “proactively prevent failure” (Marzano et al., 2014, p. 1). Air traffic control towers, nuclear plants, and aircraft carriers are examples of organizations that adhere to the HRO mindset, because failure on their part can have disastrous consequences for many. Marzano adapted the framework to schools as a way to help them focus their work on creating systems of constant monitoring based on the most important research-based factors for schools to ensure that all students graduate fully prepared for college and career. The framework consists of five progressive levels to be mastered to become a HRS. Each level contains leading indicators which are the best practices related to that level and surveys are used to monitor progress toward attainment of each indicator (Marzano, et al., 2014). Level 1, considered the foundational level, is ensuring a Safe, Supportive, and Collaborative environment for all students. Within this level, schools consider the level of safety perceived by students, parents,
staff, and administrators, as well as having systems in place to gather input from all stakeholders and use that input to make decisions in the school. These areas can all be affected by disproportionate discipline between African American and White students. This connection to the HRS framework makes the work of this study relevant to school leaders in Arkansas because it aligns with work they are already engaged in as they improve their schools.

In order for students to learn, they must be able to concentrate and focus in an orderly environment. Teachers must feel that they are safe and have the ability to teach their classes without excessive disruption, while at the same time feeling supported by their administrators. Students who spend extended amounts of time away from the class due to discipline issues miss out on important instruction and fall behind the other students. A positive school culture and discipline practices that honor every student can lead to higher student achievement for students in all ethnic groups. The school improvement goals are directly related to student achievement for all students in every school.

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December of 2015 at the federal level, a renewed focus has been placed on equity in schools across the nation. Arkansas crafted their ESSA plan by working closely with stakeholders and the plan was approved by the federal government in January 2018. The Arkansas ESSA plan calls for equitable opportunities for all students in Arkansas, including having effective educators in every classroom, effective administrators in every building, and leading the nation in student-focused learning. School accountability measures take into account a number of achievement indicators, including how many students are reading on grade level, growth and achievement in math, science, and literacy, and student engagement as measured by the number of students chronically absent. The new
ESSA plans take a “big picture” approach to student achievement with the inclusion of multiple measures of growth and achievement to determine the effectiveness of each school and district.

In December 2016, the Arkansas State Board of Education convened a Student Discipline Task Force to review existing policies and practices and examine their effect on positive outcomes for students. Their findings, released in September 2018, call for major changes in how students are disciplined in Arkansas to reverse disparity among races and negative student outcomes. Their recommendations included tasking the educational cooperatives with providing training and support in positive school discipline practices such as restorative justice and banning the use of discipline practices that exclude students from school and prevent them from completing their education. They also recommended that discipline rates be included as an indicator on school report cards that are released to the public and to use a school climate measure in accountability measures under ESSA. It is clear that the state of Arkansas is focused on improving equitable outcomes for all students.

Is High Leverage

Racial disproportionality in student discipline is an equity issue that is high leverage for many reasons. Across the country schools have begun to focus on their discipline practices. In response to alarming rates of disproportionality in school discipline and use of exclusionary discipline practices, Arkansas legislators passed Act 1059 of 2017. This law prohibits the use of OSS and expulsion for students in grades K-5, except in cases where “the student poses a physical threat to themselves or others or causes a serious disruption that cannot be addressed by other means” (State of Arkansas, Act 1059, 2017). Although this law has only been in effect for a few years, there are already calls from state organizations to expand the ban on exclusionary discipline up through grade eight. Banning the use of exclusionary discipline is one way that the
state is trying to address disproportionality. However, banning the use of exclusionary discipline alone does not guarantee equity in schools for all students.

When groups of students are being disciplined at disproportionate rates, we must seek to understand the root cause. This is not just an issue of school discipline, but rather one of social justice. The laws of our country require that all students receive a free and appropriate public education. The research shows that the trend of disciplining African American students at higher rates than White students is prevalent across our country in schools and that these students are being disadvantaged educationally (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). By gaining more information about why this inequity is happening in rural schools, we can then use that knowledge to create systems with equitable opportunities for all students. The long-term effects of student discipline can be damaging for future economic outcomes, as well as have an impact on a student’s social emotional development. Students who are subjected to exclusionary discipline in schools end up in prison at higher rates than those who do not, a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline (APA, 2008). If students can avoid contact with the court system while they are in school, they have a better chance of completing their education and attaining post-graduation success.

**Research Questions**

The disproportionality of discipline between African American students and White students has been well-documented in the literature. However, most of the studies done were conducted in large urban districts or suburban districts where the population of African American students comprised the majority. This study explored what this issue looks like in rural school settings.
The research questions for this study were:

1. How is discipline disproportionality perceived in specific rural schools from the principal’s perspective?
2. What factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality in specific rural schools from the principal’s perspective?

**Overview of Methodology**

This study followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to gain a deeper understanding of this complex problem. According to Creswell (2014), explanatory sequential mixed methods is a design in which, “The researcher first conducts quantitative research, analyzes the results, and then builds on the results to explain them in more detail with qualitative research” (p. 15). The quantitative data in this study consists of student discipline data from five rural schools in Southeast Arkansas for the 2017-2018 school year. Using raw discipline data, composition index scores and relative differences in composition for discipline infractions and actions were calculated to provide an overall picture of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students for each school. Analysis of the quantitative data was then conducted for the purpose of informing the qualitative data collection. Within qualitative research, there are numerous methodological approaches that may be taken based on the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 18). In the qualitative portion of this study, an instrumental collective case study approach was used to gain insight from principals in the five sample schools about their experiences related to student discipline to understand more deeply the phenomenon of disproportionate referral rates for African American students. According to Creswell (2018), a collective case study approach is one where a single issue or concern is investigated in multiple cases to provide various perspectives of the issue, while an instrumental
case study focuses on a single issue or concern that is studied in depth (Stake, 1995). In this study, five rural schools in Southeast Arkansas served as the cases through which to explore the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline. The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data in this study provided a deeper understanding of this complex issue by starting with the discipline data and then including the voices of the leaders of each school to share their perspective.

**Positionality**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as an instrument of research. Because they are involved in the setting with participants as they collect the research, positionality must be addressed throughout the study. This section describes the positionality of the researcher, including my own experiences related to this topic, how I feel about the issues of race and disproportionality, and why this issue matters to me. My positionality influenced the methodology, how I related to my participants, and how I analyzed the data.

**Researcher’s Role**

The role I assumed as the researcher was one of both an insider and an outsider. In my current role, I serve as the Instructional Leadership Specialist at an educational cooperative located in Central Arkansas providing professional development and support for administrators and teachers in the region. However, this role is new for me as of one year ago. Prior to that time, I served as the principal of an intermediate school located in Southeast Arkansas and had lived and worked in the community for twelve years. It was during my time as principal that I began to ask myself why African American students were overrepresented in student discipline in my school and what could be done to correct it. Because of my relationships with colleagues in the area, I was able to secure participants with whom I had worked with as a principal who were
leading schools similar to my own in the region. Although technically an outsider when conducting the research, I was also able to understand their challenges, having so recently been an insider in the region.

Navigating the insider and outsider relationship provided both advantages and challenges throughout the study. As an insider, I understood fully the challenges these principals were facing, the context of the culture of the region, and the limited resources at their disposal. I was also able to leverage my insider role to discuss the sensitive issues related to race and disproportionality. Because the participants knew me as a principal, I believe they trusted me enough to share their true insights into the situation. The challenge associated with the insider role was making sure that I did not make assumptions about their experiences based on my own or insert my own interpretation to explain their raw data. My role as an outside who no longer lived in the region also contributed to open dialogue. Participants shared their insights freely, without fear of influencing a relationship with a fellow principal in a neighboring school. Being an outsider also allowed me to examine the data through a more detached lens, knowing that I was not facing the same issues they were each day. It was also helpful because I was able to ask difficult questions about student discipline without the principals feeling like we were comparing schools. I believe this unique role as both an insider and an outsider contributed to the quality of information shared by participants and ultimately, allowed me to develop a deeper level understanding of the phenomenon and more accurately answer the research questions.

Assumptions

It is well established in the literature that African American students are disciplined at higher rates than any other race of students both across the nation and in Arkansas (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). An assumption of mine is that the
participants in this study are not fully aware of the impact of implicit bias in student discipline. I make this assumption based on my own experience as a principal who didn’t really understand the role of implicit bias in my daily work. Another assumption I make is that the discipline systems in place in these schools are based on the expectations of white, middle class Americans and their traditional ideas of discipline. Knowing the culture of the region, common beliefs of parents, and my own experiences working in schools in this region, I assume that the majority opinion prevails. A final assumption I make is that the educators involved in this study choose to be in the role of administrator because they want to make a difference in the lives of their students and are truly interested in doing what’s best for each child. I have yet to meet a public educator who is willing to deal with the frustrations, demands, and low level of pay who wasn’t doing it because they genuinely wanted to make a positive difference in the lives of children.

My bias as a researcher is related to my role as a teacher and administrator in public schools for the past twenty-two years. I am a white, educated, middle-class female who is part of the racial majority group in our country and bring my own implicit biases related to students, educators, and school discipline. Based on my experience, I am more likely to positively regard administrators with discipline philosophies similar to my own and worked throughout the study to put aside my own bias to listen to the perspectives of all participants. As an educator aware of the impact of racial bias on student discipline, I have found that I often want to protect African American students in discipline situations. I also had to stay aware of my feeling towards educators who persist in using outdated practices related to school discipline that are harmful to students resulting in higher rates of exclusionary discipline for students. In my years as an administrator I faced many situations where students were being pushed out of classrooms by teachers who didn’t know how to relate to them. Writing reflexive memos and using dialogic
engagement with thought partners throughout the study helped me to keep my own bias in check and allowed for documentation of my own thoughts and feelings during the study.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Cultural awareness - Cultural awareness is defined as the ability of the principal to discuss the hidden aspects of culture or those not easily observed, including the values, beliefs, attitudes, norms, communication styles, and role expectations of the students (Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Disproportionality in discipline – The over- or underrepresentation of students in discipline actions when compared to the percentage of the student population they comprise. For example, if African American students comprise 35% of the student population but 75% of the discipline infractions come from African American students, then the difference shows the degree by which they are overrepresented. In this study, composition index scores were calculated to determine disproportionality.

Exclusionary discipline -- Any discipline consequence assigned to a student that removes them from their regular classroom, including ISS, OSS, and Expulsion.

Equity -- All students have access to the necessary supports to succeed at school, free from bias.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The first chapter of this dissertation is the introduction and an overview of the study conducted. The second chapter contains the literature review and conceptual framework, which situates the problem of practice of disproportionate discipline within current literature. The third chapter details the methodology utilized in the study and information related to the context of each school. Chapter Four contains quantitative and qualitative findings of the research, beginning with patterns noticed across all five schools, followed by a presentation of the findings.
by each school individually. Chapter Five discusses the findings based on the research questions and conceptual framework and concludes with implications for practice and future research.
CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline actions for African American students compared to White students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. I searched for literature that would establish the scope of the issue of disproportionality and possible causes for the rate across various types of school settings. I utilized several databases including the University of Arkansas databases, EBSCO, and Google Scholar to locate peer-reviewed articles and books related to student discipline. Search terms used included “racial disproportionality and school discipline,” “race and student discipline,” “school-to-prison pipeline,” “exclusionary discipline and race,” “suspension and disproportionality,” “rural schools and race,” “Critical Race Theory and discipline,” and “discipline policies and disproportionality.”

I also read several books to provide context and background on the issue including Why Rural Schools Matter by Mara Casey Tieken (2014). This book, written by a Harvard researcher based on her dissertation research, was a case study of two different school districts in Arkansas, Earle and Delight, and the challenges each faced as a rural district. I also read Critical Race Theory: An introduction (Third Edition) by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2017), Implicit Bias in Schools: A Practitioner’s Guide by Gina Gullo, Kelly Capatosto, and Cheryl Staats (2018) and Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education by Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2017). These texts helped me to understand the factors related to being rural, Critical Race Theory, implicit bias, and the foundations of racism in the United States. Table 1 details the sources that informed this study.
Table 1
*Number and Types of Sources Reviewed*

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**Review of Literature**

The review of literature, while not exhaustive, focused on the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline as it has been documented over the past forty years. The following sections represent the topic areas that were explored to further understand disproportionality in student discipline in rural schools: disproportionality and school discipline, policies and school discipline, school characteristics and school discipline, racial bias, and Critical Race Theory.

**Disproportionality and School Discipline**

Discipline in public schools typically consists of a teacher making a discipline referral for students when they break the norms of the school, resulting in punitive consequences ranging from student detention, parent conferences, corporal punishment, ISS, OSS, to expulsion. Consequences are generally applied by administrators according to the school discipline plan, which is guided by federal, state, and local policies. Often, this discipline disproportionately affects certain groups of students, including African American students. A landmark report by the Children’s Defense Fund on school suspensions, published in 1975, first reported that African American students were being suspended from schools at a rate of three to one when compared to White students (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975). This rate of disproportionate discipline has consistently persisted and its causes and effects analyzed by researchers (Gregory
According to the Office for Civil Rights’ most recent data collection (2015), the rate of suspension for African American students when compared to White students is still holding steady at a rate of three to one. Administrators are not solely to blame for the disparate impact. In a study conducted by Skiba et al. (2011) using a data set of over 350 schools from across the nation, significant disparities in school discipline were found at all stages in the discipline process including the initial referral by the teacher and the administrative decision on consequence for African American students. They also found that at the elementary level African American students were twice as likely as White students to receive a discipline referral and four times as likely at the middle school level (Skiba et al., 2011).

Recent studies have focused on disproportionate outcomes for more specific groups of students within the demographic, such as African American females. Blake et al. (2017) found that the shade of skin or colorism of female African American adolescents was a significant factor in the risk of school suspension. Females with darker skin and more Afro-centric features were likely to be suspended twice as often as students who were white, while lighter skinned African American females did not show the same risk level. According to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR, 2014), African American females are suspended more than females of any other ethnicity. In 2013 African American females made up 50.7% of all girls with multiple out-of-school suspensions, while African American boys made up only 39.9% of all boys with multiple out-of-school suspensions. Research has also focused on disproportionate suspensions for students in preschool. African American students comprise 18% of preschool enrollment, but represent 42% of all students suspended once, and 48% of the students who have had more than one out-of-school suspension (OCR, 2014). The pattern of disciplining African American
students beginning with our youngest students, is well established in the literature. As required by law, each school’s policies and practices must be aligned with both federal and state mandates governing school discipline.

Policies and School Discipline

Federal Policies

There are several federal policies that directly impact discipline policy in public schools across the nation, beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Within this landmark legislation are two sections that affect student discipline in schools. Title IV prohibits discrimination in public elementary and secondary schools based on race, color, or national origin, while Title VI prohibits discrimination by race, color, or national origin in any entity that receives federal funds. Both of these sections in the statute require public schools to enact a system of equity and fairness for all students with regard to student discipline policies and practices. More recently, a “Dear Colleague” letter dated January 8, 2014 by the OCR provided significant guidance on how schools were to examine their actions related to student discipline. The brief outlined two themes that the OCR looks for when investigating claims of discrimination, which include “different treatment” and “disparate impact.” Different treatment concerns a school intentionally punishing students of different races in a different manner, while disparate impact focuses on policies administered consistently to all students, but result in one race being punished at disparate rates when compared to the others. These sections of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 have provided a framework for public schools to use when creating their systems of discipline and are enforced by the OCR and the Department of Justice. Schools are required to submit all discipline infraction data into the OCR database each year, and the numbers are compiled and analyzed for
disparate impact. This accountability measure applies to all public schools that accept federal funds and provides a comprehensive data set for analysis.

In December 2018, the Federal School Safety Commission released a report recommending President Trump revoke the Dear Colleague guidance from the Obama administration intended to prevent the discipline of students groups at disproportionate rates claiming that the guidance puts students in danger. The report stated, “Where well-meaning but flawed policies endanger student safety, they must be changed.” (Federal Safety Commission, 2018, p. 67). Days after the report was presented to the President, the guidance was revoked in the name of preventing school violence without worry of meeting quotas or tracking disparate impact on groups of students.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) released a report in July 2019 called Beyond Suspensions that provided further insight into the federal government’s current position on disproportionate discipline. Based on the revocation of the 2014 guidance by President Trump, the CCR found that the approach of the Trump Administration has reduced their ability to investigate claims of disparate impact in schools, the identification of patterns of systemic racism, and caused them to close 65 investigations without guidance (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). They also found that in response to the guidance in 2014, many schools changed their discipline policies, which resulted in greater perceptions of safety, higher student achievement, and higher graduation rates resulting in higher safety ratings (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). This guidance and revocation has caused confusion for school leaders as to what the true federal guidelines are with regard to school discipline.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was passed by Congress in December 2015, includes reference to a school’s discipline policies and both directly and indirectly impacts
school discipline. This law requires states to create their own education plan for how they will support local schools in improving the conditions for teaching and learning, including reducing incidents of bullying and harassment, reducing the use of discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions, and eliminating the use of aversive behavioral interventions like restraints and seclusions. Title 1 of ESSA requires accountability and disaggregation of discipline data, so that states can target schools with disproportionate rates and provide support. Title II of ESSA provides funding in the form of professional development for staff members on ways to incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) for students and ways to provide for students who have experienced trauma. Title IV of ESSA creates funding for schools that are leading the way by implementing dramatic changes in school culture, climate, and safety by creating a Youth Promise program. The greater focus on SEL for students and rewarding of schools with successful discipline systems that do not result in disparate treatment is promising. With the recent approvals of state plans under ESSA, this law may greatly impact changes in school discipline policies across the nation.

State Policies

There are numerous state laws that affect school discipline in Arkansas ranging from requirements to create a tiered system of support for students with behavior issues to provisions for teachers to remove a student from the classroom. Those policies that most directly impact this problem of practice include those related to suspension and expulsion of students. Act 1059, which amended Title VI of the Arkansas Code concerning discipline of students in schools, was passed in 2017, and prohibits assigning OSS as a consequence for students in grades K-5, unless they pose a threat of harm to themselves or others, or have created a disruption that cannot be addressed through other means. This law was aimed at reducing the numbers of students in
elementary school being excluded from school. In 2013, the Arkansas legislature passed Act 1329, which was designed to examine the disparities in school discipline between student groups. This law states that schools may not use OSS as a consequence of truancy, and also created a specific accounting system to keep track of all school discipline in the state. Even though this law has been in effect for more than five years, there are still schools in Arkansas who suspend students for truancy (Anderson, 2018). The goal of this law was to examine trends and data specific to Arkansas to create real change in the future for students. Act 1015 of 2017 is a recent law in Arkansas requiring school districts to report the number of student incidents per 100 students for each demographic group required for state reporting. With the addition of this reporting measure and a new online data portal easily accessed by anyone called MySchoolInfo, the state is providing the means of making the problem of disproportionate discipline rates visible to the public. Act 529 of 2019 was passed during the last legislative session and recently went into effect. This law prohibits the use of corporal punishment for students with a disability and is causing some districts to ban the practice altogether. Each school is required to create their own discipline policies, using input from a representative group of stakeholders, based on the guidelines provided by the state. They are also required to provide a copy of their discipline polices to the state each year after they have been revised and approved by the local school board (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

**Zero-Tolerance Policies**

Following the passage of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, states were required to create their own laws mandating a year-long expulsion of any student who brought a firearm to school, regardless of the circumstances. The law began a chain reaction of states creating systems of harsh mandated consequences for offenses that have come to be known as zero-
tolerance policies. According to Mallet (2016), zero tolerance policies are often used on first-time offenders, meant to deter others, and require severe consequences. However, these policies have done little to reduce violence in schools or prevent future offenses by sending a message (APA, 2008). According to Losen and Gillespie (2012), “The truth is that harsh and punitive policies do more harm than good” (pg. 11). According to Mallet (2016), the use of zero-tolerance policies in schools has led to an exponential increase in the number of students referred to juvenile court systems, with disproportionate numbers of African American students represented at every level of the system. Often exclusionary discipline consequences are applied to students as a result of zero-tolerance policies.

Exclusionary discipline practices include any consequence that excludes a student from participating in their regular school schedule. The use of suspension, both in and out of school, disrupts a student’s learning by taking them out of the classroom and away from their peers. Although suspensions are intended to teach students of the severity of their offense, they instead remove them from the classroom and place them on a path where they are missing instruction, classwork, and socialization with their peers (Skiba et al., 2011). Another outcome of exclusionary discipline is that the exclusion does nothing to help the student repair the harm they have created or re-socialize them with their peers. Students are often removed from the situation and returned a few days later, without any intervention or support provided. Prior to 1975, students had little protection when being given suspension or expulsion as a consequence for discipline at school. However, in 1975 the Supreme Court in *Goss v. Lopez* ruled that the exclusion from school violated a student’s civil rights and could not be used without due process safeguards. Although the safeguards provided an appeal process for students, the Court did nothing to limit exclusionary discipline or its use in schools. School suspensions and expulsions
are associated with negative outcomes, including lower academic achievement (Anderson, 2018), higher rates of school dropouts, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Exclusionary discipline practices have an even greater impact on African American students because they are administered at higher rates than they are for White students, often for nonviolent offenses. In a study of a nationwide database, Skiba et al. (2011) found that in elementary school African American students were four times as likely to be suspended or expelled for a minor infraction as White students, while at the middle school level, they were more likely to be suspended or expelled for disruption, moderate infractions, or truancy than White students. Numerous studies by other researchers have consistently verified disproportionately higher rates of suspension and expulsion for African American students across the United States (Gregory et al., 2010).

Students who receive exclusionary discipline such as OSS and expulsion are also more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system. This phenomenon, called the School-to-Prison Pipeline, describes a system beginning with the youngest students in school that subject them to policies and practices that make it more likely for them to end up in the court system than receive a quality education (Mallet, 2016). The criminalization of schools through “get tough” policies, the presence of law enforcement in the form of school resource officers, and mandated consequences requiring schools to involve the juvenile justice system for discipline offenses have all led to increases in the number of students incarcerated (Mallet, 2016).
School Characteristics and School Discipline

School characteristics have been shown to have an impact on disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students. One characteristic is the type of community where the school is located. Much of the research on school discipline and disproportionality has been conducted in urban school settings, with little being conducted in rural school settings. Losen and Skiba (2010) found that the highest rates of suspension overall were in poor urban districts. In a study utilizing data from 326 districts in Ohio for 2007-2008 school year, Noltemeyer et al. (2010) found that urban districts with high poverty had the highest rates of exclusionary discipline, while rural/agricultural districts with small enrollment and low poverty had the lowest rates of suspension and expulsion. Because poverty was controlled for in the study, the authors suggested that another factor beyond poverty was likely responsible for disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline in Ohio schools. In contrast, rates of disparity between African American and White students in receiving suspension have been found to be as high and in some cases higher in suburban districts with more resources (Wallace et al., 2008). Another study found that urban school districts disciplined their students more than rural districts, regardless of the wealth, district size, or racial composition (Tajalli & Garba, 2014). The overall consensus of the literature is that urban districts typically have the highest rates of disproportionate exclusionary discipline among students when compared to rural school settings, but it is unclear if the reason is because more research exists on urban districts or because there truly is more disproportionate discipline happening in these schools.

Although little research has been conducted in rural schools on disproportionality rates in discipline, there have been some studies that provide insight into what discipline looks like in rural settings. The Harvard Law School Mississippi Delta Project prepared a policy brief for the
Quitman County School District in Mississippi to help them make positive changes to their discipline system (Harvard Law, 2014). They compiled data on the school and found that, in general, Mississippi has some of the harshest discipline policies in the nation. The Quitman County School District is a rural district of 8,000 people, who are mostly farmers. There are 1,273 students in the district, 97% of whom are African American. According to their principal, the district does not deal with student violence as often as an urban school might, but they do discipline students at high rates through the use of corporal punishment and frequent suspensions. Disorderly conduct is their most prevalent student infraction at the high school, which has 340 students. During an 8-month period during the 2013-2014 school year, they disciplined students 944 times for disorderly conduct. Other offenses that they deal with often include disrespect, defiance, and skipping class. During the 2010-2011 school year in the district of 1,273 students, they reported 1,594 incidents of corporal punishment. Although the offenses in the district are not of a violent or serious nature, students experience punitive discipline at high rates in this district. The trend of high numbers of student discipline in this rural school provides some insight as to how student discipline manifests in this rural setting.

Racial composition of the student body has also been found to have an impact on disproportionate rates of discipline. Researchers have consistently found that in districts where African American students are the majority, schools tend to use more punitive and harsher consequences, have more zero-tolerance policies, use less interventions, and have higher rates of exclusionary discipline (Welch & Payne, 2010). In a study by Skiba et al. (2014), it was found that one of the strongest predictors of OSS for any student, regardless of gender, school achievement, the economic level of the school, or the severity of the student’s behavior was attending a school with a higher percentage of African American students. In contrast, Tajalli
and Garba (2014) conducted a study of placement in disciplinary alternative education programs in Texas using data that represented 62% of all schools in Texas. Using multilevel regressions, they found that as the “whiteness” of a school district increased, so did the discipline rates for African American students. Their only explanation for this finding was that racial bias was a key factor in discipline decisions.

Based on the overwhelming persistence of the rate of disproportionate discipline of African American students, numerous factors have been explored including poverty, behavior differences among students, and culture. However, studies have failed to find concrete evidence that any of these factors can be pinpointed as a cause. In studies where Socio-Economic status (SES), a common measure of the poverty rate within a school, was controlled for, it was found that race still made a significant difference in discipline rates (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). The behavior of African American students has also not been found to be the cause. A study conducted by Bradshaw et al. (2010) used teacher rating of individual students and their discipline data to further explore this concept. They found that African American students still have a higher likelihood of receiving a discipline referral even after controlling for the child’s level of behavior problems. Essentially if they had a White and an African American student with identical teacher ratings of their behavior and all other measures in the study, the African American student had a 24 - 80% higher chance of receiving a discipline referral compared to the White student, depending on the type of infraction (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Skiba et al. (2002) found that White students were disciplined for more easily observable behaviors, such as smoking or vandalism, while African American students were disciplined for behaviors that are more subjective, such as disruption or defiance. The overwhelming conclusion of many studies is
that racial bias plays a significant role in the disproportionate rate of discipline for African American students.

**Implicit Racial Bias**

Racial bias has been studied extensively in conjunction with the disproportionality of discipline for African American students. Racial bias can be divided into two distinct types: explicit and implicit (Girvan, 2015). Explicit bias consists of the conscious attitudes or beliefs that we hold about a person or group such as prejudice and overt racism. Implicit bias, on the other hand, refers to the unconscious perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes that we have based on our learned experiences that impact our decisions. Studies have found that implicit bias is more likely to impact discipline decisions than explicit bias, especially when the decision being made is not clear-cut (Pearson, et al., 2009). In addition, researchers have found that our implicit biases often reflect the stereotypes of the society we live in as opposed to our actual beliefs and feelings (Gullo et al., 2019). In a study of school discipline referral patterns, McKintosh et al. (2014) found that discipline referral decisions can be impacted by implicit bias, especially with behaviors that are more subjective such as disrespect, defiance, and disruption. They found that when discipline decisions are being made, making discipline procedures for defiance and disrespect as objective as possible, operationalizing staff expectations, and providing training in how to respond instructionally to student behavior (McKintosh et al., 2014) can have a positive impact on referral rates. Based on their findings, they developed the Vulnerable Decision Point (VDP) model to help schools identify their vulnerable decision points where implicit bias may have an effect, including offenses that are subjective in nature, those that are labeled as more severe, and location. Other studies have confirmed that bias plays a role in the referral process. Skiba et al. (2002) conducted a study and found that African American students were more likely
to be referred to the office for offenses that were more subjective in nature, such as disrespect, threats, excessive noise, and loitering. White students, on the other hand, were more likely to be referred for more objective offenses, such as smoking, leaving without permission, vandalism, and obscene language. Their study suggests that implicit bias is present at the classroom level when teachers are forced to make a judgment call on a subjective offense. In a follow-up study by McKintosh et al. (2016), the VDP model was tested. This model focuses on the key points where racial bias can impact decision-making in the discipline process including at the referral level (classroom teacher) and at the consequence level (administrator). This study confirmed earlier studies and found that overall, African American students were more likely to receive office referrals for subjective offenses than White students.

Tajalli and Garba (2014) conducted a study of students referred to Discipline Alternative Education Programs in Texas and found that as the percentage of White students increased in a district, so did the discretionary punishment (administrator choice) for minority students. They also found that the mandatory punishment of minority students increased as the White population increased. They surmise that if the disproportionate rates of discipline for minorities are not being impacted by bias, then they should have found similar rates of mandatory punishments for White and minority students. They concluded that racial bias impacting discipline decisions was the likely cause of disproportionality. Fenning and Jenkins (2018) suggest that administrators can be successful in reducing disproportionality by offering professional development in the areas of implicit bias, empathy training, and using classroom consultation/teacher supports as methods to address the root causes of disparity in discipline.
Critical Race Theory

School discipline situations are an expression of dominance and power with the school attempting to exercise control over the student to preserve order. One lens to examine the relationships between race, power, and racism is called Critical Race Theory (CRT). This collection of theories, first applied to the legal system, are now being extended into other fields, including health care, social sciences, and education. According to Delgado and Stefanic (2006), the basic tenets of CRT are:

1. Racism is pervasive and has been institutionalized in the United States,
2. Because this racism advances the interests of Whites, many are not interested in abandoning it,
3. Race is a social construction, and
4. Minority groups are racialized differently throughout history, usually in response to the labor market.

The themes of CRT can be applied to school discipline in a number of ways. According to Simson (2014), one way that it can be applied is through the social construct of race which comes from the social sciences. He explains that when encountering an unknown individual, a complex chain of decisions happen subconsciously that are influenced by what the person has experienced which allows them to assign the person to a racial category. These decisions include how they view the other person and their race, how they regard that racial group as a whole, and the relative worth that they place on that group (implicit bias). We form our concept of race based on their dress, their behavior, their accent, and many other factors that must be sorted out to make these assignments. Once we have classified someone through this process, we then take their current behavior and use it to either confirm or disconfirm what we believe about this race.
In the United States, most people tend to associate Whites with superiority and African Americans with inferiority. We then make a decision about how we feel about a particular person. The resulting decision is shaped by implicit bias. The fact that these processes take place automatically and without our knowledge makes it difficult to directly measure implicit bias.

When this social construction of race takes place in the context of student behavior in school, opportunities for bias occur. The teacher first processes student behavior with their own implicit bias and makes the decision to refer (or not) a student to the office. The administrator then approaches the student through their own socially constructed idea of race, and makes a decision about what type of discipline to administer. If the behavior in question is ambiguous in any way and the decision to be made relies on the administrator’s discretion, the difference between saying the student “had a bad day” or is a “threat to others” can create patterns of decisions that marginalize certain groups of students. Simson’s view is that this assigning students to categories based on implicit bias is the root cause of disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students in schools.

**Conceptual Framework**

In serving as a school administrator for several years, I have often wondered why African American students were overrepresented in disciplinary actions both in the schools where I have worked and in other schools around the state. I have observed the problem first-hand as an assistant principal and principal in a rural school where the demographics consisted of a student body that was 65% White and 35% African American. After closely monitoring student data over several years, I found that African American students were receiving discipline at rates two and three times higher than the White students were receiving disciplinary actions, which is
highly consistent with the research base (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011).

Due to recent changes in the law requiring school discipline data for all schools in Arkansas to be posted in an online portal, a closer examination of discipline rates shows that this problem is not unique to the school where I worked. In examining the data for schools across the state, it is clear that discipline is being applied to African American students at disproportionate rates in rural districts across the state. Because the literature often focuses on the discipline practices of large urban districts, little is known about the experience of African American students in rural schools with regard to school discipline other than the numbers.

In Arkansas, a study by the OEP found that students who received exclusionary discipline in high school, and particularly in ninth grade, had a lower likelihood of not completing high school or enrolling in college (Anderson, 2018). They also found that the use of ISS for African American students increased in a period over five years between 2006 and 2012 in Arkansas while the rate for White students decreased (Anderson, 2018). During the same time period, Arkansas was 15th in the nation for the use of OSS for all students and 13th in the gap between African American and White students for OSS (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). In the latest report from the OEP in Arkansas on student discipline dated September 2018, African American students receive OSS, expulsion, or a referral to an alternate program for 25% of their discipline referrals, as compared to only 15% of all other races. (Anderson, 2018). This statistic is compounded by the fact that in Arkansas, African American students receive 117 office referrals per 100 students while White students receive 37 - 40 per 100 students (Anderson, 2018). They also found that some schools in Arkansas were more likely to administer longer exclusionary periods for students, including schools with greater proportions of African American students,
and middle and high schools. It is clear that disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students are prevalent across the state of Arkansas, and not just in the school where I served as the principal.

There are three aspects of the school discipline system that I believe are impacting rates of disproportionate discipline for African American students in Arkansas including the discipline policies and practices that are currently in place at the school-level, the amount and quality of training the administrators and teachers have had in each school, and the impact of implicit bias at both the system level and the individual interaction level with teachers and administrators. The discipline system of each school is based on federal and state guidelines, but is highly influenced by local policy as well. Local discipline policies are often created by administrator and school-level teams to meet the needs of the school. Some schools may have established discipline systems that have been used for many years, while others may rely on teacher and administrator judgment to administer. However, just because a system exists in policy does not mean that it is the daily practice of the teachers or administrators. Both the polices and the practices should be taken into account when determining what school discipline for African American students looks like in rural districts.

The amount and quality of training that administrators and teachers have had also has an impact on the disproportionate rate of discipline for students in rural schools. A link exists between the type of training a teacher or administrator has had and the way they discipline students. According to Diem and Carpenter (2012), the majority of principal preparation programs fail to adequately prepare leaders for conversations about equity and social justice. The number of applicants for each teaching position is another indicator of the amount of training educators in rural districts have. In a study conducted by the OEP in Arkansas, rural districts
reported that they had on average four applicants per job opening, while the districts located in
cities reported eight applicants on average per job (Forman et al., 2018). Districts located in
urban areas have more applicants to choose from, which increases the likelihood that they can
hire more experienced teachers.

According to DeMatthews (2016), administrators must be well-trained in equity practices
to understand their impact on student discipline rates and be willing to adopt a social justice
framework for their practice. A social justice framework attends to how resources, recognition,
and opportunities to better one’s life are allocated (DeMatthews, 2016). This training is often
provided to those working in large, urban districts, and specific administrator preparation
programs at some colleges and universities. Specialized programs for those working with schools
that have high poverty also exist. However, most administrators take a basic educational leader
preparation program and do not gain the benefits of more specialized skills such as ensuring that
the systems they put in place are equitable. According to DeMatthews (2016), school leaders
have a unique position in being able to influence equitable outcomes for students in their schools
and should receive the necessary training for social justice leadership.

Teacher training is also an important aspect of student discipline. Teachers who have
good classroom management skills use a variety of approaches to create safe learning
environments for their students, while those who struggle may rely on office referrals and
outside support to manage their students. This can lead to higher rates of referrals for students
with more challenging behaviors. Teacher and administrator training is a key factor when
examining disproportionality in rural schools.

The presence of implicit bias is also a likely factor in the disproportionate rate of
discipline for African American students in rural schools in Arkansas. The research shows that
our implicit bias is based on years of learned experiences beginning with our earliest memories, and are so automatic and embedded that we are often unaware of what these biases are. When administrators and teachers work together to create discipline systems, their bias may become institutionalized into the system. When you examine a school discipline system through the lens of Critical Race Theory, it is possible to see where implicit bias can become institutionalized. For example, if a group of White, female, middle-class educators work together to create a system for discipline referrals, the system is likely to reflect their idea of what a classroom disruption is, how severe it must be before the student receives a referral, and what is appropriate in the classroom. Implicit bias can also come into play in the implementation of discipline systems, especially when the behavior requires a judgment call. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the interaction of these three main areas concerning student discipline and disproportionality for African American students.

![Figure 1. Conceptual Framework](image-url)
Figure 1 represents three leading factors that result in disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students in rural schools based on the literature reviewed, current theory, and my own experiences as a school administrator in the region. Each of the three factors is represented by a circle, and the three circles are overlapped to show the interconnectedness of each factor. All three of the factors are within a box that is labeled with Critical Race Theory in all four corners to show how these factors are steeped in the tenets of CRT.

Circle A in Figure 1 represents the discipline policies and practices that exist in the school. These policies and practices are informed by different bodies, including the federal and state mandates, which is represented by the portion only in Circle A. Local discipline policies and practices are also impacted by the amount and quality of training the administrators and the teachers have had, both in their design of discipline systems and their daily practices. This is represented in the portion of the diagram labeled D, which is where Circles A and B overlap. For administrators, training in designing systems that promote equity for all would have a positive impact on discipline policies and procedures, while a lack of that training may have a negative impact. For teachers, culturally responsive pedagogy and practices, especially related to classroom management would have a positive impact, while training or use of an authoritarian management system or the lack of any training at all would have a negative impact. The discipline policies and practices of the school can also be impacted by implicit bias. This is marked by the portion labeled E, which represents the overlap of implicit bias on both the discipline policies and the practices in the school.

The second circle, labeled Circle B, represents the training that the administrators and teachers have had in a school concerning discipline. The amount and quality of educator training can impact the types of discipline policies and the everyday practices in a school, as represented
by section D, and there can also be an overlapping of training and implicit bias, represented by section F. If educators receive training that makes them aware of the effects of implicit bias on students, this could have a positive impact on the rates of school discipline, while the lack of awareness or training in the impact of implicit bias could have a negative impact. The third circle, labeled Circle C, represents the presence of implicit bias in schools. This bias can impact the discipline policies and practices in a school (section E), and can also impact administrator and teacher training (section F). This is where the lens of Critical Race Theory can be helpful in examining a school’s discipline system.

The middle portion of the diagram, section G, is where all three of the factors overlap with one another. Where discipline policies and practices, implicit bias and a lack of effective administrator and teacher training collide, disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students may occur. When seeking to understand what disproportionality of student discipline between African American and White students looks like in rural schools in Arkansas, this visual can help to illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue.

Chapter Summary

This literature review was written to explain the research that exists on rates of disproportionate discipline for African American students by exploring the following topics: Disproportionality and school discipline, legal mandates, policies and school discipline, school characteristics and school discipline, racial bias, and Critical Race Theory. This section also included the conceptual framework used to further define the problem of disproportionate discipline as it relates to students in Arkansas in rural schools. The conceptual framework detailed the interconnectedness of the key findings from the literature with regard to discipline
policies and practices, teacher and administrator training, and implicit bias through the use of a Critical Race Theory lens.

Following this chapter is Chapter Three - Inquiry Methods, which provides a detailed description of the research design and methodology utilized to explore the answers to the research questions. Chapter Three also provides a rationale for the study, explains the context of the selected rural schools in Arkansas, and explains the data collection methods and analysis used.
CHAPTER THREE – INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline actions for African American students compared to white students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. This study followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to gain a deeper understanding of the complex problem. According to Creswell (2014), explanatory sequential mixed methods is a design in which, “The researcher first conducts quantitative research, analyzes the results, and then builds on the results to explain them in more detail with qualitative research” (p. 15). Data collection in this study occurred in two phases, quantitative and qualitative.

The first phase of data collection focused on the quantitative data consisting of raw discipline numbers from each school for the 2017-2018 school year. The data was compiled by race, types of disciplinary incidents, and type of discipline action taken, and then composition index scores were calculated for each school to determine if disproportionate rates existed between the two student groups. The data was then analyzed and the results used to inform data collection in the qualitative phase of the study. Within qualitative research, numerous methodological approaches can be taken based on the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In this study, an instrumental collective case study approach was used to gain insight from administrators in five rural schools in Southeast Arkansas about their experiences related to student discipline to understand more deeply the phenomenon of disproportionate referral rates for African American students. According to Creswell (2018), a collective case study approach is one where a single issue or concern is investigated in multiple cases to provide various perspectives of the issue. The cases in this study are each of the five schools being studied. An
instrumental case study focuses on a single issue or concern that is studied in depth (Stake, 1995). The decision to utilize both a collective and instrumental case study approach was made to gain a deeper understanding of disproportionate discipline in several rural schools within the same region of the state and to determine if the causes of disproportionate discipline were similar to those found in the literature.

The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data in this study provided greater understanding of this complex issue. This is an issue with many layers, including the power administrators have on the discipline actions students receive, the impact of bias in the discipline system they administer, and the possible impact of being a rural school. The research questions for this study included:

1. How is discipline disproportionality perceived in specific rural schools from the principal’s perspective?
2. From a principal’s perspective, what factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality in specific rural schools?

The exploration of these two research questions provided insight into factors that are influencing discipline rates in rural schools within Southeast Arkansas based on the principals in the schools.

This chapter begins with the introduction, a rationale for the research approach to answer the research questions, and a description of the setting and context of each school where the research was conducted. It continues with a description of the research sample and participants, the data collection methods, and the data analysis methods. It concludes with a description of why the methods used were trustworthy and rigorous, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and a summary.
Rationale

The choice to utilize an explanatory sequential mixed methods study was made to gain a more accurate picture of the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline in rural schools. Collection of the quantitative data was necessary to see where each school was in terms of their reported discipline numbers. This data was also needed to compare to the student population to determine if disproportionate discipline was present, and if so, to what degree. The inclusion of the qualitative phase of the research was critical in beginning to understand why the discipline was disproportionate in these schools. Because so much of the research has been conducted in large, urban schools with a majority of minority students, it was important to include the voices of these principals about what was going on in their schools. Both urban and rural schools can have the same rates of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students, but without their voices, the issue cannot be fully understood. This can help to determine if the reasons why disproportionate discipline exists in rural schools are similar or different from those in urban schools.

The collection and analysis of the quantitative data first helped me to become aware of each school’s unique pattern of discipline data. Calculating composition index scores revealed the degree to which each school had disproportionate discipline rates between African American and White students for the target year. This knowledge helped me to understand which of the schools were experiencing the highest rates of disproportionate discipline and also those that had lower rates. It also allowed me to tailor the questions asked during both interviews with each principal to the specific patterns noticed both in their school and across all schools included in the study. This knowledge guided me to probe deeper for responses during interviews in specific areas because I was aware of their data and which areas were disproportionate. Because of the
sensitive nature of the topic being discussed, I decided to hold two separate interviews with each principal to allow ample time to build understanding of the study and create a feeling of safety and security with responses. The choice to use a collective instrumental case study approach for the qualitative portion of the study was made to provide a deeper picture of the phenomenon across schools. By exploring disproportionate discipline in five rural schools within one region of the state, I was able to explore the impact of the principal’s beliefs on their discipline data and hear a variety of perspectives. Not only did this choice allow me to develop a picture of the discipline system in each school, it also provided the opportunity for comparison between schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as the theoretical framework for this study because of its alignment with the issue of disproportionality in school discipline. Each aspect of the study was designed with regard to the tenets of CRT to discern the effect that implicit bias may have in disproportionate numbers of African American students being disciplined when compared to their White peers in rural schools. The research questions were based on the principal’s perspective because they are the primary actor in a school discipline situation that determines what type of consequence a student receives. The open-ended interview questions were designed to elicit information from each principal without implying judgement of the discipline procedures in place. The research sample also aligned with CRT because the principals interviewed mirror the demographics of the leadership in most schools in the region. All of the principals interviewed were White, which is the norm for this area. Following data collection and analysis in each phase, a clearer picture of how the rural schools in the study approached discipline of their White and African American students emerged, allowing for conclusions to be drawn related to CRT.
Problem Setting/Context

This study was carried out in five rural schools in Southeast Arkansas, with each school serving as an individual case. The region of Southeast Arkansas, also known as the lower Delta, is comprised of ten counties in the southeast region of the state, and is bordered by Louisiana to the south and Mississippi to the east. According to the 2017 Arkansas Labor Market and Economic Report, between 2012 and 2016 the population in this region decreased by 8,742 people. The top industry in the region is food preparation and serving-related positions. The largest occupation is cashier, and their average wage is $18,000 a year. All five schools are located in this region within three separate school districts.

The academic performance of the schools in this area is significantly lower than academic performance in the other areas of the state. Most of the schools in the Southeast region of the state earned letter grades of C or D, with some earning F’s. Only one school out of 44 in the region earned an A in 2017. The letter grade for each school is calculated based on a formula that takes into account student performance in literacy and math, their growth from the previous year in those area, and other indicators, including student attendance and graduation rate. The first year for schools in Arkansas to be compared using letter grades calculated from a variety of data points, as opposed to a single test, was 2017. Most of the schools in this region have a poverty rate of at least 50%, as measured by the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

This region was chosen as the focus area because it is where the researcher had most recently been a principal and observed disproportionality in discipline first-hand. The schools and districts chosen appeared to have high rates of disproportionate discipline in 2017 for African American students when compared to their White students based on publically available
data and are all located in rural communities. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the three school districts and the communities where they are located.

Table 2
District Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School District A</th>
<th>School District B</th>
<th>School District C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Population</td>
<td>9,142</td>
<td>9,626</td>
<td>9,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$37,586</td>
<td>$29,965</td>
<td>$29,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Enrollment</td>
<td>1,568</td>
<td>1,930</td>
<td>1,027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. School Districts B and C are located in the same community.

Five schools from the three districts were included in the study. Elementary A is part of School District A, Elementary B and Middle B are part of School District B, and Elementary C and Middle C are part of School District C. All five schools are all located within a 100-mile radius of one another and have similarities and differences. Characteristics of each school are listed in Table 3.

Table 3
School Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elem. A</th>
<th>Elem. B</th>
<th>Middle B</th>
<th>Elem. C</th>
<th>Middle C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades served</td>
<td>K – 4</td>
<td>K – 2</td>
<td>6 – 8</td>
<td>K – 4</td>
<td>5 – 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total students</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Years of Experience</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>16.15</td>
<td>11.45</td>
<td>13.52</td>
<td>9.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Grade</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Discipline data for the 2017-2018 school year is publicly available online through the MySchoolInfo portal provided by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) and is reported as discipline actions per 100 students, as part of the requirement of Act 1015 of 2017. Reporting the discipline actions per 100 students provides some indication about rates of discipline disproportionality, although it is not disaggregated to the level of the individual student and is subject to being skewed if there is a small number of students in the particular demographic group. This type of reporting also does not account for students with recurring infractions. Table 4 contains the discipline actions per 100 students for each school for 2017-2018 for each school in the study.

Table 4
Discipline Actions per 100 Students for 2017-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elem. A</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Elem. B</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Middle B</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Elem. C</th>
<th></th>
<th>Middle C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>AA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers reflect the number of actions per 100 students. W = White students, AA = African American students, ISS = In-School-Suspension, CP = Corporal Punishment, OSS = Out-of-School Suspension, and EXP = Expulsion.

Based on the actions per 100 students, it was apparent that disparities existed between White and African American students in each school. However, this data does not take into account the portion of the student population each race comprises, nor does it indicate the number of infractions reported for each demographic group.
Research Sample and Data Sources

The sample for this study consisted of the building principal from each of the five schools in the study. One assistant principal from one of the elementary schools was also included because she had a direct role in discipline and has been in the position in that school for the past sixteen years. The principals were chosen through convenience sampling. The researcher had known and worked with each participant for the past several years and had established collegial relationships, making sensitive discussions about race and disproportionality possible. Each of the principals had been the principal at their campus for a minimum of four years prior to the study and had taken a direct role in student discipline. To protect the participants, all data collected was labeled using a pseudonym. Because all of the participants were well-known in their communities and served in administrative positions, special precautions were taken to protect their responses. Data was stored using pseudonyms in a password-protected file on a password-protected device. Table 5 details characteristics of each school administrator.

Table 5
Administrator characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elem. A Principal</th>
<th>Elem. B Principal</th>
<th>Elem. B Asst. Principal</th>
<th>Middle B Principal</th>
<th>Elem. C Principal</th>
<th>Middle C Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years Exp.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = Female, M = Male, W = White.
All principals in the study were veteran educators and had been an administrator in their school for a minimum of four years. They were all White, as is the norm for schools in the region, and the majority were female. All of the principals had lived in the community where their school was located for many years, with the exception of Middle B’s principal, who lived in a neighboring community. All of the principals willingly agreed to participate in the study and were interested in finding out ways to reduce disproportionate discipline in their school.

**Data Collection Methods**

**Quantitative Data Collection**

Because the research design of the study was explanatory sequential mixed methods, quantitative data was first collected and analyzed, and was then used to inform qualitative data collection. Following IRB approval, student discipline data was requested from the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) through a formal Data Request. Discipline data from each school in the study was requested to include the following data disaggregated by demographic group: Report DS0060: Infraction, which contains data categorized by the code that best describes the violation or infraction and Report DS0070: Action Taken, which contains the punitive action taken by the school authority or court authority to reprimand the student after an offense is committed. Data were provided in the form of Excel spreadsheets containing total counts by grade level for each category of either infraction or action for every school. Once the data was received, analysis was conducted to inform the qualitative data collection phase.

**Qualitative Data Collection**

Qualitative data collected consisted of two separate interviews of approximately 60 minutes with each building leader held about six weeks apart. The first interview took place at each participant’s school at a time convenient to them. All first-round interviews took place
during a school day in May 2019. Questions for the first round of interviews focused on getting participants to explain their beliefs related to discipline in their school, their ideas on how being rural impacts their school, and general information on their current discipline system.

Approximately six weeks lapsed between the first and second round of interviews, to allow the participants time to finish the school year and the researcher to transcribe the data from the first interview. The second round of interviews took place through videoconferencing at a time convenient to each participant in late June 2019. The decision to use Zoom as the platform for the second interview was made to allow for convenience for the participants since school was no longer in session. It also allowed the researcher to switch from the on-camera mode to share the screen for participants to see the spreadsheets prepared with each school’s discipline data disaggregated. The second interview focused on asking more specific questions related to discipline coding in each school, their reactions to seeing their disproportionality rates for the target school year, and their thoughts on why disproportionality existed in their school. Both interviews were recorded using the recording and transcribing app Rev. Following each interview, data was transcribed using the services of Rev.com and then analyzed.

Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative Data Analysis

After student discipline infractions and actions were obtained from ADE through a data request, calculations were conducted to determine if disproportionate discipline was present in each school. Before calculations could be performed, a decision had to be made about how to handle the Restricted Values (RV) in the raw data. Because of data security, ADE cannot report any numbers for student groups where the value is less than ten. These were represented as a RV in the data set. Therefore, when analyzing data by grade level and demographic group in each
school, a value of one was substituted for any action or infraction where all actions and/or infractions in the category were listed as RV, including the total. For actions and infractions where a total number was reported, but one or more of the categories contained RV, simple calculations of adding up the numbers and subtracting from the total was used, and then the remaining number was divided among any cells with RV in that category. This method allowed the total numbers to be kept as accurate as possible, while providing some value for categories that had less than ten infractions or actions to represent activity. Having close approximations provided valuable insight into which infraction and action codes were being utilized by each school and which categories contained the highest numbers.

Following the substitutions in each category for RV, the data was broken down by each school into two main categories: infractions and actions. Each school’s data was already disaggregated by grade level and ethnicity. For the purposes of this study, students who were categorized as African American and White were listed separately, and students categorized as any other race, including Two or More Races, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander were grouped together into a category called Other. The number of students in the Other category for all five schools was considerably smaller than their African American and White student populations and ranged from 5-15%.

After compiling the data for infractions and actions by race and grade level, total student population numbers were calculated. From the total number, a percentage of the population for each race was calculated by dividing the number of students in the population by the total number of students and then multiplying by 100. The same calculation was also used to determine the total number of student infractions and actions for all students and then by race for the categories African American, White, and Other. Only data from the following categories for
infractions was included in this study, because they represent the categories where all schools had values reported in their data: Insubordination, Disorderly Conduct, Fighting, Bullying, and Other. Only data from the following categories for actions was included, because all schools had values reported in these categories: ISS, OSS, Corporal Punishment, and Other. The total number of expulsions was less than five for all schools, so it was not included. Once the total number of infractions and actions for each race were determined separately, the composition of infractions and actions for each race was calculated by dividing the total number of infractions for students in the race category by the total number and multiplying by 100. This calculation resulted in composition index scores for each race for both infractions and action in every school. The differences in composition index scores were calculated for each racial group and were used to determine the degree of disproportionate discipline. The formulas used for calculation are listed in Chapter 4 with the results.

Spreadsheets for each school were created to display the data resulting from calculations for both infractions and actions and to allow for researcher analysis. Analytic memos for each school were generated discussing trends noticed in the data, areas of concern and question, and possible theories about disproportionate rates that informed the interview questions with the principal of each school. This disaggregation of raw data by racial group and calculation of composition differences provided a clear picture of student discipline for each school for the target year and led the way for qualitative data collection.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

Following each round of interviews with the administrators, the data was transcribed using Rev.com. Transcripts were reviewed by the researcher and corrections made by listening to the recordings. The data were then coded using descriptive coding based on the content of what
each participant said. As the data were being coded, a dialogic engagement partner worked alongside the researcher to assist in the coding process and monitor bias. Once the initial round of coding was completed, a review of all categories was conducted and codes were created to represent units of meaning. Eleven major categories were derived from the first cycle of coding. After the first cycle of coding was complete, the second cycle of coding focused on further refinement of the data took place. The second cycle of coding resulted in the eleven categories being broken down into a total of thirty-eight sub-codes, which further categorized the information into more specific categories. The dialogic engagement partner also assisted with this process of re-categorizing and breaking down the information into more specific codes. The codebook in Appendix B contains a complete list of codes and descriptions. Figure 2 provides the codes generated from both cycles of coding during the process of qualitative analysis.
Once the codes were all assigned to a major category codes and sub-codes were generated, analytic memos were created for each. During this process, all responses within the code were reviewed, analyzed, and then summarized to gain a deeper understanding of participant responses. Key quotes were also chosen to accompany each code that best represented the participants’ thoughts. Researcher thoughts and analysis were then written for each code.

Through this process of coding, re-coding, and generating analytic memos, patterns and themes began to emerge both by school leader and overall. One of the patterns that began to
appear early in this process was that individual participant responses were often heavy in certain categories and absent in others. It became clear that three principals were taking specific actions within their schools to meet the discipline needs of their students, including actions based on student cultures, because all of the responses within Taking Action - Culturally Aware were only from those leaders. On the other hand, in the category of Taking Action - Passive, the only responses were from the three other leaders. When the rates of disproportionality in each of these schools generated in the quantitative data analysis portion of this study were compared to the responses of their leaders, conclusions were able to be drawn.

**Trustworthiness**

To establish trustworthiness for the study, protection of the participants first had to be addressed. Safeguards were designed for use throughout the study to minimize the risk of harm to participants based on the sensitive nature of the study. Informed consent was presented to participants before each interview in written form and they knew that they had the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time and remove their data. Confidentiality is another safeguard that was provided to participants. To provide safety for participants in their responses through interviews, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant at the beginning of the research process and used throughout. This protected the identities of the participants and ensured that their statements made about their own experiences would not cause damage to them either personally or professionally. Schools and districts were also represented as pseudonyms, since the participants are the principals in their schools. These safeguards protected participants related to the ethical issues of the researcher’s position and the sensitive topic being studied.

Methods to ensure validity were also embedded within the design of this study by utilizing processes and techniques to address transparency, collaboration and reflexivity.
Triangulation was used to enhance the validity of the study and provide insight from multiple perspectives. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), it is important to examine an issue from differing vantage points, even if the data do not converge (p. 195). Within triangulation, there are several different methods that were utilized in this study. Perspectival triangulation is a form of triangulation where participants are selected because they can provide a different perspective based on their role or occupation. Participants from schools with varying percentages of African American students were included to provide varied perspectives within the same region. Another form of triangulation used was methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation involves using multiple methods of data collection to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, two methods of data collection were used to answer the research questions including collecting discipline data and conducting interviews. These methods were chosen because they provided opportunities for participants to share their experiences in both direct and indirect ways, providing a greater opportunity for the truth to emerge and differing perspectives to be heard.

Another process utilized in this study to enhance trustworthiness using collaboration was participant validation. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), participant validation is a way for the participants to “speak into and about the study” being conducted (p. 197). Throughout the study, checks occurred to ensure that the researcher was capturing the experiences of the participants and staying true to their meaning through analysis. After interviews were transcribed, participants were invited to check their own transcripts for accuracy and clarify their thoughts. Reflective questions were used to help the participants validate their experiences and provide deeper insight if needed such as “Does this statement fully capture your true feelings on this issue? If not, what would you add to it?” Prior to the second interview, participants were
asked to review the transcript from their first interview and reflective questions were asked to
determine if they felt they completely explained their views. This process helped to make the
data collection and analysis processes transparent for the participants and the researcher, reduce
researcher bias, and provide for validity of the findings.

Thick description was also used to increase the rigor of this study. The use of thick
description requires the researcher to provide enough description of the context where the
research is taking place to allow for thick interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study,
thick description focused on the schools and their leader to allow readers to understand the
factors that situate this problem of practice. Much of the details for this thick description
emerged through the participants’ responses during their interviews, and some of the information
was collected through research using data provided to the public from the Arkansas Department
of Education on the MySchoolInfo website. The addition of these thick descriptions increased
transparency in the problem being studied and allows readers to determine the validity of the
data generated.

Dialogic engagement was used throughout the study as a way to challenge the
assumptions and biases of the researcher. These dialogic experiences took place at regular
intervals during the study and provided a framework for the critical examination of the emerging
data. The Associate Dean in the College of Education at a local university served as the primary
dialogic engagement partner for the researcher throughout the study. A fellow cohort member
and doctoral candidate also served as a critical friend in this process. Both dialogic engagement
partners were carefully selected for their understanding of qualitative methods, ability to
critically question the researcher, and level of trust. Care was taken in dialogic engagement to
preserve confidentiality for participants through the use of pseudonyms and careful selection of data shared.

In addition to dialogic engagement, structured reflexivity processes were used to enhance validity. It was important for the researcher to actively and critically monitor positionality and bias throughout the research process in order for the study’s findings to be valid, given the role as an insider and outsider in the research data. Analytic memos were used as a reflective process throughout the study to maintain a critical stance. Ideas of best practices in school discipline and training experiences of the researcher were also important to recognize during data collection and analysis. As this problem of practice was examined through a Critical Race Theory lens, the researcher’s positionality as a member of the white, middle-class was also constantly examined. A crucial tenet of CRT is the presence of racism in institutions due to implicit bias, and by nature, implicit bias often takes place subconsciously. To control for implicit bias, dialogic engagement was focused on reflecting on the level of bias in questions asked, comments offered, and conclusions drawn throughout the research process. Because the goal was to represent the experiences of the participants as accurately as possible, it was necessary to examine positionality and bias throughout the study. Within the design of this study, processes and techniques to increase rigor and trustworthiness were included. Their goal was to ensure the accurate representation of the experiences of the participants and an unbiased examination of the data.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this study include several external factors. One limitation of this study is the type of participants who agreed to participate. Because disproportionality in discipline can be a sensitive subject, those administrators who elected to participate may have a more open
view of racial disproportionality versus those who chose not to participate. Changes in school discipline policies at the district, state, and federal level may have impacted the answers principals gave during interviews, reflecting a difference in their views from what they were during the target year from which the student discipline was data collected.

The delimitations of this study include the relatively small number of administrators interviewed who are only from one region of the state. Those selected provided their experiences with regard to school discipline and policies, but their views may not be representative of the larger group of administrators in the region or in rural schools in general. Limitations and delimitations are further discussed in Chapter 5, following the presentation of the findings and discussion.

**Chapter Summary**

This study of disproportionate rates of discipline in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas from the principal’s perspective was accomplished through an explanatory sequential mixed methods study of five schools in the region. Critical Race Theory served as the conceptual lens informing the methodological decisions made in the study. Quantitative data was collected from the Arkansas Department of Education through a formal request of de-identified student data including discipline incidents and actions for each demographic group. Data was disaggregated by racial group for each school and composition index scores were calculated. Differences in composition scores were calculated to determine if racial groups were over- or under-represented in discipline infractions and actions based on the portion of the student population they comprise for each school. Qualitative data was collected through a series of two interviews with each building level administrator to gather their perspectives on discipline in their school and provide insight from the results of the quantitative data collected. All interview data was transcribed and
coded until themes emerged and then combined with the quantitative data from each school to gain a more complete picture of student discipline and disproportionality. The findings of this study provide deeper insight into the issue of disproportionate discipline in rural schools and contribute to administrator understanding of the impact of implicit bias in their discipline decisions on marginalized students.
CHAPTER FOUR- ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline for African American students compared to White students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. Chapter Four was designed to analyze the data collected from the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) as well as principals in the study concerning student discipline in the selected rural schools. The findings in this chapter represent the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from a total of three separate and distinct sources: Student and school demographic data collected from the MySchoolInfo website, provided by ADE and fully available to the public; student discipline infraction and action data obtained from ADE based on a formal data request; and two rounds of semi-structured interviews drawn from a sample of five principals and one assistant principal in the selected schools.

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings across all schools, starting with an analysis of the quantitative data. The relative differences in composition for both African American and White students in the schools studied are initially presented. Composition index scores and relative differences in composition for student disciplinary infractions were calculated using each individual school’s discipline data based on the 2017-2018 school year and provided by ADE to provide a broad, overall picture of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students. A description of the major findings of qualitative data analysis for all schools are then discussed. Qualitative data consists of responses collected through two rounds of interviews with each principal and analysis resulting in the identification of major themes and subthemes. Following the descriptions of overall findings for both quantitative and
qualitative data, individual findings for each school are presented. To highlight the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach, quantitative findings for each individual school are first presented, followed by the qualitative findings. Presenting all data collected for each school together reinforces the design of the instrumental collective case study approach focusing on the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students in these rural schools.

**Results for All Schools**

**Quantitative Data Results**

An analysis of 2017-2018 discipline data of each school in the study revealed the statistical presence of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students. Composition index scores and relative differences in composition were calculated for all schools to provide more accurate information on the existence of disproportionality between African American and White students in the schools studied using formulas found in the guide, *School Discipline Data Indicators: A Guide for Districts and Schools* (Nishioka et al., 2017). Composition index scores were initially calculated for each school to determine the proportion of each student racial group comprising the total number of discipline infractions and actions when compared to the student population. The composition index was calculated using the following equation.

\[
\text{Composition index} = \frac{\text{Number of discipline incidents for a racial group}}{\text{Total number of incidents for all students}} \times 100
\]

Following calculation of the composition index for disciplinary incidents within each school by racial group, a relative difference in composition was then calculated to measure the
relative difference between discipline infractions in the different racial groups within the entire student population. A positive value for a relative difference in composition means that a particular student racial group is overrepresented in the number of disciplinary incidents, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented. The relative difference in composition was calculated using the following equation.

\[
\text{Relative difference in Composition} = \frac{\text{Composition of discipline incidents for each racial group} - \text{Composition of same racial group in the population}}{\text{Composition of same racial group in the population}} \times 100
\]

Table 6 displays the relative differences in student composition by race based on the number of disciplinary infractions for each school, which provides a measure of the level of disproportionality experienced by each student racial group in relation to the proportion of the entire student population in a particular school.

Table 6
Relative Difference in Composition of Infractions and Enrollment Composition for Students in All Schools by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>African American students</th>
<th>White students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary A</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>-44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary B</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>-60.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle B</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>-47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary C</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>-44.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle C</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>-7.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of infractions for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the population. A positive value for difference in composition indicates the racial group is overrepresented in infractions when compared to the racial group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented.
When examining the relative differences in composition, the higher the number, the
greater the level of observed disproportionality for that particular student racial group. Based on
calculations, all schools measured in the study revealed that African American students are
statistically overrepresented based on the number of disciplinary infractions in relation to White
students. Yet, some schools revealed higher levels of disproportionality in student discipline
compared to others. For example, Elementary A has the lowest relative difference in composition
for African American students, which likely reflects the fact that the largest percentage of their
student population is African American (48%) but also takes into consideration the portion of
infractions for African American students (52%). Elementary C, on the other hand, has the
highest relative difference in composition (89.7%), and a lower population of African American
students (27%). Elementary C also had the highest recorded number of disciplinary infractions of
all the schools in the study (902). In contrast, Middle C has the lowest population of enrolled
African American students of all the schools (24%), but still has a lower relative difference in
composition (29.1%) when compared to the other schools in the study. Elementary and Middle C
have similar percentages of African American students (27% and 24%), but have drastically
difference relative differences in composition of discipline infractions (89.7% and 29.1%) even
though they are in the same district. Elementary and Middle B have similar portions of their
student population who are African American (39% and 34%, respectively), and both show
higher relative differences in composition (61.5% and 76.5%).

The relative differences in composition for White students in all five of these schools
illustrates that they are significantly underrepresented in the number of disciplinary infractions,
with the exception of Middle C. This may be partially explained due to the smaller student
population of the school (299) or the fact that the majority of their students are White (68%).
Differences in relative composition can be sensitive to group sizes that represent a high or low percentage of the population, which may affect disproportionality rates in these schools (Nishioka et al., 2017). The underrepresentation of White students in discipline infractions relative to the composition of the student population in all five of the schools studied may be an indicator that the current discipline systems in place in these schools successfully deter White students from misbehavior or that White students do not receive the same level of discipline attention as African American students. It is also an indicator that implicit bias may be a contributing factor in how disciplinary infractions are managed in these schools.

Analysis of the composition scores and relative differences in composition for African American and White students within each school indicate that there are sizeable differences related to disproportionate discipline in these schools. Elementary A and Middle C have lower rates of disproportionate discipline for African American students, while Elementary B, Middle B, and Elementary C have much higher rates. All schools, with the exception of Middle C, show a high rate of disproportionate discipline for White students in that they are underrepresented in discipline infractions. A more thorough breakdown of each school’s discipline data and disproportionality rates are provided in the section for each school, which follows the overall qualitative findings for all schools. Analysis of quantitative data provided insight into questions asked of participants during the qualitative phase of the study to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of discipline disproportionality in each of the school settings.

**Qualitative Data Results**

Qualitative data were collected based on two rounds of interviews with principals within each school. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and the interviews were held six weeks apart. Once all the interview data were collected, they were coded and re-coded as a
means to identify potential, emerging themes. As the principals discussed their individual views on student discipline and disproportionality, they also shared information concerning their own beliefs and experiences, the barriers they often faced, and the work they were currently engaged in to improve student achievement outcomes. Two primary themes emerged in conjunction with a number of sub-themes, providing further insight and perspective relating to the research questions. Figure 3 details the dominant themes and sub-themes resulting from the interviews, which will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section that follows.

**Figure 3. Major Themes and Sub-Themes Derived from Qualitative Data Analysis.**

**Theme 1: Principal Behaviors and Beliefs Impact Student Discipline Disproportionality Rates**

The first major theme derived from the data was that principal behaviors and beliefs in these rural schools have an impact on their school’s discipline disproportionality rates. Based on analysis of the quantitative data, one school had significantly lower rates of disproportionate discipline for African American students than the other schools in the study (Elementary A). The principal of Elementary A shared many actions she was taking with her staff to improve equitable discipline for all students, including providing professional development on culturally
responsive teaching, implicit bias, and student engagement. Middle C also had a lower relative difference in composition (29.1%), shared her beliefs about building relationships with students, and specifically talked of how she handles African American students. The other three schools had significantly higher relative differences in composition for African American students as compared to the total student population in the school. When this knowledge was combined with the data collected from both rounds of interviews, it became clear that the principals in the schools with lower rates of disproportionate discipline shared many characteristics, while those with the higher rates of disproportionate discipline did as well. The codes used to generate each sub-theme were aligned with the articulated beliefs and behaviors of each of the principals and provided deeper insight into the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline in rural schools. The major categories and codes leading to this theme are listed in Figure 4.
Sub-theme 1.1: “Culturally Aware” Principals Who Take Specific Actions Have Lower Rates of Disproportionate Discipline Between African American and White Students. Within the category of principal beliefs, the strongest emerging theme was that principals who exhibited awareness of the students’ cultures in their schools through their interview comments and take intentional actions to support those cultures have schools with lower rates of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students. Cultural awareness is defined as the ability of the principal to discuss the hidden aspects of culture or those not easily observed, including the values, beliefs, attitudes, norms, communication styles, and role expectations of the students (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). In the
code Principal - Culturally Aware, principals discussed many aspects of culture in their schools, especially related to behavior. Some noted that they have observed that respect and disrespect mean something very different to their African American and White students. They went on to explain that students growing up in White homes are more often taught how to respond respectfully to adults in their opinion while students in African American homes often tease and ridicule each other as a way to "toughen" each other up. They felt that when African American students come to school, this creates negative interactions because the majority of the adults their students encounter in these schools are White women. One principal, in explaining the difference, said:

I don't know. A big thing with our African American males is respect, and if they feel any kind of slighted, or disrespect from anybody, teacher or students, they lash out a lot. It's not all of them. It's just those few that have the most social problems, what I call ... they don't have the social skills that a lot of kids have. Or they don't have the appropriate social skills that I guess we connect with our culture that's going to be successful.

Several principals mentioned making eye contact as an example of respect, especially with African American children looking down and away when they are upset. They also noted that some of the African American children in their schools have a really hard time controlling their anger, which creates problems at school. The "fight or flight" reaction of many African American children seen at school often gets them in trouble, and one said that in their culture, the kids “just bully each other.” Some noted that our "normal" is not their "normal" and that we must learn more about how their culture works to truly understand. Another principal noted:

I try not to be racist, but you do notice differences. You notice differences in how people react. I notice differences in these little African American boys. It's heartbreaking. It really is. I try my best to show love for them, and care for them. I try to understand where they're coming from. I build relationships with them, but it's hard. It's hard because their behavior makes it hard for them to conform to white society's expectations in a classroom, or in our culture, or in a job market. I don't know. It's just a whole societal thing that's just really a hard problem to solve. All we can do is try to reach as many as
we can. Instill the love of education, instill that in the home, the importance of education, because that is a way out.

Responses reflected that the principals viewed these cultural differences through a deficit lens and were quick to note that their African American students have a much harder time fitting into their school system successfully. According to Nelson and Guerra (2014), “Deficit thinking stems from the ethnocentric notion that the beliefs and standards of the dominant group are inherently correct (p. 71).” By viewing the problem as the students not being able to control their anger and the parents not teaching them the right way to behave, the principals perceived that the problem was with the students and families themselves rather than the system itself. One principal had over thirty years of experience working in schools with a majority of African American students and noted that parents often told her she could "see beyond their anger to the potential they had." It's apparent that some principals in the group have deeper levels of cultural awareness of their students than others, although none of the principals gave responses that would align with the definition of culturally responsive (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). In their view, educators who approach issues from a deep knowledge of invisible culture such as which cultures are more group-oriented versus individual-oriented and use that knowledge to explain how culture clashes occur are categorized as culturally responsive.

An analysis of the qualitative data indicated that some of the principals interviewed were culturally aware and expressed a need to incorporate cultural awareness into their school culture, while others did not see the value. One principal remarked,

Overall we don't spend a lot of time with culture and that kind of thing because we're so focused on teaching reading, writing, and math. We don't make a big deal out of any cultures, really.
During qualitative coding analysis, codes were examined for proximity and/or overlap in the data set. Closely linked in the data for \textit{Principal – Culturally Aware} were codes related either to the \textit{Principal - Taking Action} based on this knowledge or codes aligned to \textit{Principal - Passive} (non-active) responses to issues caused by cultural mismatches. In Figure 5, these codes are listed by the number for each building leader to show relationships among the codes.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure5.png}
\caption{Quantity of Codes for \textit{Principal-Culturally Aware}, \textit{Taking Action}, and \textit{Passive} by Leader}
\end{figure}

When compiling the data from each building leader by code, the relationship between the codes and the quantitative data became evident. Districts where the leader expressed a cultural awareness had lower numbers of disproportionate rates of discipline between African American and White students. The leaders in District C had the most codes for culturally aware as well as the most codes tied to taking actions in their schools. However, Elementary C also had the highest rate of differences in relative composition for African American students. Interestingly, Elementary A has the highest number of codes for taking action but much fewer codes for
*Principal - Culturally Aware.* This disparity may signal that the principal at Elementary A has internalized the language of cultural awareness and has moved solidly into taking action without the need to verbalize intent. In contrast, District B had the highest numbers of codes tied to *Principal - Passive* and the lowest number of codes tied to *Principal - Culturally Aware.* Both schools had high rates of disproportionality between African American and White students.

**Sub-theme 1.2: Different Types of Specific, Concrete Actions Make a Difference in Disproportionality Rates.** All building leaders described actions they were taking in their schools to improve student outcomes. Data for each of these codes included specific examples of actions the principal had initiated at their school to meet a need for their students. Emergent patterns in the data made clear that participant responses were heavy in certain categories and absent in others. The data made clear three of the principals in the study were taking concrete actions within their schools to meet the discipline needs of their students, including taking some culturally responsive actions (Elementary A, Elementary C, Middle C). The other three leaders (Elementary B Principal and Assistant Principal, Middle B) discussed actions passively, by describing actions others should take, things they would do if a barrier did not exist, or not really knowing what to do to address certain issues. When the rates of disproportionality generated in the quantitative data analysis portion of this study were compared to the responses of their leaders, the relationship between quantitative and qualitative data led to clear conclusions. Within the category of *Principal - Taking Action,* several codes from the data were highly related to actions being taken by the building leaders (Figure 6).
In the data, principals with a high degree of cultural awareness also had more codes tied to *Taking Action – Hiring Practices*. For *Hiring Practices*, culturally aware leaders described what they were doing to actively recruit more African American teachers for their school such as working with local universities and sending African American teachers to recruit at job fairs. A common theme from these principals was that they wanted to hire the best person for the job, but that they also understood how important it was for their students to see someone like them in the teacher’s role. One principal remarked:

> We've actively recruited African-Americans so they see some of the culture in some of our staff members, too. Because if I have ... what is it? 61% white, and 27% African-American, that should reflect in my staff. We've done a lot of our own. I've hired two or three of our interns because you know what they can do. I hired the best teacher, not just because it was an African-American teacher. I hired the best teacher.
These principals also had more codes tied to the idea of *Taking Action - Creating Culture*. They described the behaviors of students based on hidden motivators and norms and their understanding of why students act the way they do at school. Principals with a high degree of cultural awareness heavily predicated their talk in this category on the need to develop relationships with students and families. These leaders had the deepest understanding of the hidden rules of culture and its effect on students in school. In their work, these leaders are actively working to create a school environment where their students feel “safe and cared for.” Principals talked about their work implementing counseling groups for students needing specific support, focusing on positive behavioral solutions and creating a culture of high expectations for all students, as well as creating a culture of “empathy” where teachers truly understand what their students’ lives are like at home.

These leaders also had a higher number of codes tied to *Taking Action – Professional Development*. Many of the leaders were accomplishing this work through professional development from external sources that they were engaged in with their teachers focused on implementing specific actions to impact their building culture and make it more positive and inclusive for all students. Elementary A had contracted with Solution Tree to support their work in creating a more equitable environment for students. District B’s leaders mentioned professional development from an outside speaker who focused on reaching the needs of students in poverty, while District C was engaged in work through a grant from a state university focused on implementing PBIS. For two of the districts, the professional development included work in redesigning their discipline system. The school that had the most comprehensive professional development plan was Elementary A, which had engaged in a rigorous equity audit of data, and from there had determined to implement a plan focused on culturally-responsive
teaching. Their comprehensive plan consisted of multiple steps taking place throughout the year and involved all stakeholders both in the formation of the plan and implementation in classrooms on a daily basis. Both school leaders in District C outlined their plan for implementing PBIS in their school for the coming school year, and were also able to share many systems already in place in the district such as a community health clinic located in the school for all students and staff and their program providing breakfast and lunch to all for free.

These school leaders also spoke of taking action by creating culture through redesigning their discipline systems and these codes were highly related. The principals with the greatest weight of codes tied to cultural awareness also had codes tied to Taking Action – Redesign System. These data focused on ways principals were working to improve their discipline systems including making the referral process more clear, creating a protocol for how to refer a student to the office, and providing training for teachers on how to craft a student discipline referral. District C was engaged in the most work here because of their implementation of PBIS. They created a matrix for the district based on the positive behaviors they were encouraging students to display, articulated tiers of discipline behaviors with their teachers, and were in the process of drafting lesson plans for all teachers to use to teach their students the expected behaviors. This work represents a mind shift for many of the teachers in District C because of the move away from punitive discipline. Middle C’s principal remarked:

The big thing about PBIS is changing our behavior. The first thing we work on is changing our behavior, before we start working on changing the behavior of the students.

Elementary A’s work in redesigning the system was focused on having a more objective system, not letting bias impact decisions related to discipline, and building empathy for students’ lives at home as well as cultural competence in the classroom.
Figure 7 details the codes for each school leader for the category *Taking Action* to show the weight of specific actions being taken by each leader.

*Figure 7. Quantity of Codes in Principal - Taking Action by Building Leader. TA = Taking Action, PD = Professional Development.*

The principals of the schools with lower rates of disproportionality for African American students were characterized as highly engaged in taking formal, concrete actions within their school, even though the schools were not taking identical actions. The analyzed data suggest that principals who took actionable steps to redesign disciplinary systems and supported that work with comprehensive professional development had the highest impact on reducing rates of student disproportionality in disciplinary between African American and White students in these rural schools. Relatedly, these principals also had the lowest measured rates of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students in their respective schools compared to the other schools in the study.
Sub-theme 1.3: Principals Who Responded to Taking Action with Passive Responses

Experienced Higher Rates of Disproportionate Discipline Between African American and White Students. In contrast to the actions and codes described by three principals in Sub-theme 1.2, the other three principals (all in District B) had the highest quantity of codes in Taking Action – Passive. The data within Taking Action – Passive illustrated that there were nuances to the type of passivity each principal expressed. Some of the comments were coded passive because the principal did not assume responsibility for taking action either through vague comments like, “Someone should look into that,” or by saying that they weren’t really allowed to do anything about the issue. For example, when asked about the differences in staff and student demographics, all six leaders were quick to point out the abundance of White female teachers and the lack of African American teachers in their schools. However, these three leaders described the issue passively by saying things like, “Yes. I don't know why they don't apply here. That's something we should be finding out.” One went on to describe that they had an African American teacher several years prior, but that she had moved to another campus in the district after only a few months and they hadn’t had one apply since then. Another nuance of the responses coded as passive was that one leader in this district was an assistant principal in the building. In that role, she often does not have the authority to take direct actions, but instead must follow the principal’s lead. This may account for the high number of responses coded as passive in her case. In speaking about discipline referral processes, she said, “I'm not happy about that, but I've never been given an opportunity to do anything about it.” It is clear that these responses were coded passive for a variety of reasons.

For Taking Action – Passive, the code Principal Barrier was highly correlated. Principal barriers include failing to think about or question the policies leaders were implementing through
the lens of equity, making assumptions about teachers and students related to their words and actions, and being unaware of racial differences by describing themselves as “colorblind.”

Another principal barrier was not understanding the importance of celebrating the diversity within their student body and not spending any time or money on training teachers to understand cultural responsiveness. All of the data within Principal Barrier came from the same leaders who supplied the data for Taking Action – Passive and work in the same district. The second major theme that emerged from the data is focused on the discipline systems themselves in these schools.

**Theme 2: Disciplinary Systems in these Rural Schools Are Highly Varied and Poorly Funded in Comparison to Other School Districts**

The second major theme that emerged from the data concerned the discipline systems currently being used in the schools, including the office referral process, coding of the types of infractions, consistency in consequences, and available systems to monitor data. All principals were directly involved in student discipline in their schools, and reported seeing students daily for various discipline reasons. However, their descriptions revealed systems that were not clearly defined for their teachers, students, or parents, especially during the 2017-2018 school year. The overall theme that emerged is that these systems were highly variable in terms of discipline decisions being made by both teachers and administrators, how discipline is reported and monitored, and the level of support provided for students with recurring discipline incidents. Figure 8 details Theme 2, the sub-themes that emerged, and the related codes from the data.
Figure 8. Second Major Theme, Sub- Themes, and Codes.

Sub-theme 2.1. Discipline Decisions Are Made by Teachers and Administrators with Unclear or Non-Developed Criteria. The first sub-theme that emerged from the data was that the discipline systems in place are based on practices and “known” rules that principals have used for many years. Although all principals reported that they had discipline policies published in their handbooks, they said they intentionally left them vague to not “tie their hands” in dealing with discipline situations. They reported that they had office referral forms for teachers to complete, but that they would often send students back to the classroom if they didn’t feel the referral was worthy of being sent to the office. They also stated that some teachers sent many
students to the office (especially novice teachers), while others wouldn’t send one for the entire year. Some principals left it up to the individual grade levels to determine their discipline processes, while others said they covered with their staff at the beginning of the year how to refer a student to the office. One said that they had a referral form with tiers of offenses on it, but that they hadn’t really used that part for several years because nobody really understood it. Another had begun using a tiered chart with her teachers based on student offenses, and remarked that it had dramatically cut down on the number of referrals that year. However, she was the only principal of the six leaders using such a system. Several principals discussed how their goal was to get to the “root of the behavior” with their students to teach them proper behavior, and because of that, they hesitated to have systems that were written down to follow.

In determining the cause of a student’s misbehavior, principals shared many techniques they try. They often rely on their school counselor to assist with student behavior and talked about teaching students the proper way to behave instead of just punishing them. One gave an example of a student who kept being sent to the office for anger outbursts, and once she talked the student, she discovered that he was embarrassed because of his eczema on his head. Once they figured that out, they were able to do a 504 plan for him and allow him to wear his hoodie while at school. In digging down to the root of the issue, principals reported that they often didn’t follow a prescribed series of steps, but rather tried to figure out what the student most needed and meet that need. The process of trying to meet unmet needs of students at times led to miscommunication between teachers and administrators, which is another aspect of the discipline systems having unclear criteria.

In working with students individually to meet needs, principals noted that they would often try unconventional methods. This was especially true of principals with lower elementary
grades on their campus. For example, one principal told the story of a young student who was being sent to the office daily for a number of misbehaviors. Instead of trying to work on all of them at once, the principal and student worked together to agree on a plan to reduce the student’s behavior of throwing things when he became angry. The principal checked in with the student several times each day, and gave him a sticker each time he made it for a specified amount of time without throwing something. The teacher was unaware of the plan, and instead became angry because every time the student came back from the office, he had another sticker. The principal talked about how she had learned of the importance of communicating with her teachers to ensure they understood the plan of action and why she was only working on one behavior at a time with the student. Other principals shared similar stories of miscommunication where it became clear that teachers were not treating all students with respect or had escalated discipline situations by how they responded. The code of Teacher Barrier was highly related to Teacher–Administrator Miscommunication.

The final code related to unclear systems in the data that emerged was Implicit Bias. Because the discipline systems in these schools give a lot of leeway to teachers, there are opportunities for implicit bias to happen at several junctures. The first is in the classroom when the teacher makes the decision to refer (or not) a student. Principals told stories where students had been referred to the office and upon investigation, they found that the student had not done what they were accused of. Instead, teachers had made assumptions based on what other students said or on the student’s previous behavior when making the referral. One principal has cameras in her classrooms and shared how this had helped tremendously with eliminating bias in making referrals because she could pull up the camera at any time and see what happened in the classroom. One principal told a story of how she had assumed a student crying in the hallway
was in trouble again, because she was always in trouble for something. However, when she found out the student was upset because her grandmother had just died, the principal felt horrible. Implicit bias can also happen at the point where the administrator makes a decision about the student’s consequence. Principals reported that they often utilize progressive discipline and make decisions based on a student’s prior discipline referrals, but that they don’t have a set list of consequences for each offense that they follow every time. In these cases, it is possible that implicit bias plays a role in the consequence a student receives.

Sub-theme 2.2: Discipline Data Reporting Varies Widely from School-to-School, Not Just District-to-District. The second sub-theme that emerged from the data relates to discipline reporting and the wide variations noted among schools and districts. Principals shared information about how their discipline data codes are determined and who is responsible for the coding. None of the principals were aware of definitions from the state related to the official state discipline codes, although two mentioned that they had just seen new codes and definitions for the 2019-2020 school year and were excited to have some guidance. One principal said the state codes were not really appropriate for the students in her school because of their age (lower elementary), while another said they were only “allowed” to use certain codes for state reporting. When asked about who it was that told them this, the principal was unsure. She just said “we’ve always been told not to use certain ones.” This illustrates what happens in many discipline systems where principals rely on what has always been done, but may not understand why it is that way or who made it that way. In terms of their definitions of what the codes meant, principals were fairly consistent in defining what they considered a fight, but less in agreement about what constituted disorderly conduct and insubordination. They mentioned repeatedly that their teachers often had different ideas of what those codes meant and that they would mark a
code on a referral which the principal would later change. Two of the principals said that their secretaries were responsible for the coding that went into eSchool, which is the online state accounting system. Principals were often contradictory of their own information with regard to coding. When asked about codes, they would define them and then would say things like “we never use Disorderly Conduct as a code because that’s too harsh” or “we hate the Other category and never use it because it doesn’t explain what the student did.” However, when we would view the data from their school together, it would become apparent that almost all of their discipline was coded as Disorderly Conduct or Other. This was confusing to the principals and they were unsure of where the breakdown was with their own data and coding.

Another code that emerged from the data was that discipline infractions and actions are likely underreported in these schools. Every principal interviewed shared information about referrals that they had chosen not to enter into the discipline system because they didn’t feel that they were worthy of an office referral, had determined the referral was not accurate, or that they just didn’t have time to enter them. One principal noted, “If you saw the list of discipline referrals that I have…and I have a drawer full right now that I'm not going to even put into the system.” Another noted that because they had taught their teachers how to write referrals at the beginning of the year and were focused on accurate reporting that the number of referrals they had just in the first month of school had been “ridiculous.” Because of the huge increase, they had decided only to enter the most serious discipline referrals for the rest of the year because they didn’t want their school to look bad. Because of the lack of discipline reporting and unclear systems in place, the discipline data is difficult to compare from one school to the next.

The final code within discipline reporting is related to the way the discipline data is monitored in these schools. Several principals mentioned that they monitor their data on a
weekly basis and that they counselor is responsible for providing it for them. One principal (Elementary A), knew her discipline data very well and mentioned her current number of referrals and that they were on track to reduce their referral rate by 18% over the previous year. One principal said that he hadn’t really looked at his data recently but that his teachers were doing some work with it in designing interventions for students. It is interesting to note here that the principal who was most well acquainted with her school discipline data also had the lowest rates of disproportionate discipline in her school and the principal who relied on his teachers to look at the data had one of the highest rates of disproportionality.

In looking at the systems that these principals are using to monitor their discipline data, all mentioned using the system provided by the state for reporting (eSchool). Some relied on their counselors or secretaries to pull the data for them, and said that they weren’t trained on how to use the system. They also discussed how difficult it was to use the system and that it was not easy to locate their data or break it down in a way that showed them areas of concern. One principal said that she was thinking of using a Google form for discipline referrals for the 2019-2020 school year to have an easier way to monitor the data without having to use the eSchool system. None of the schools had purchased a data system or dashboard to supplement their data reporting, and several mentioned concerns about money in their districts and cutbacks that were taking place because of the new requirements of the salary schedule for teachers. Because these rural schools were struggling with finances and thus had to rely on only the state-provided data reporting system to track their discipline data, they are at a disadvantage to other larger school districts who are able to purchase data systems that show them in real time areas of disproportionate discipline within their school with the click of a button.
Sub-theme 2.3. Students with Recurring Infractions Require More Support Than Schools Can Provide. The final sub-theme on discipline systems involves students with frequent referrals and how principals handle them. Principals defined these students differently, ranging from a student having more than one referral in a year to those having more than five referrals in a semester. Most said that they considered students with multiple referrals in a short period of time as students with recurring infractions and that in reality, about 90% of their office referrals come from about 10% of the students. When asked about the number of students they believed had recurring infractions, they named numbers between 10 and 20. Some of these students spent as much time as 54 days in ISS last year, and one principal said she had a student who had more than 30 referrals in a school year. In terms of what principals do to support their students with recurring infractions, they said that they begin with parent contact and communication, which one described as a “back and forth” between the school and the parents to determine what was really going on with the student. Principals felt that most of these students were dealing with mental health issues or difficulties at home, and were quick to call in outside support. Several principals mentioned out-patient treatment facilities and having the juvenile court officer on “speed-dial” as measures they employ when faced with severe behavior issues. The elementary leaders mentioned utilizing mental health counselors and juvenile court most often, while the middle school principals both mentioned placement in an Alternate Learning Environment (ALE) as an option for students with recurring infractions.

Several principals talked about those with severe problems as being “more than they are trained to handle” in the school, and that because of that, they are forced to rely on outside providers. District C has an in-district health clinic and mentioned that for the 2019-2020 school year, they were bringing in a nurse practitioner who specialized in mental health treatment
because of the great need they see from their students. Overwhelmingly principals expressed frustration at not being able to help support these students and feeling like the numbers of students with severe behavior issues was increasing. They were quick to point out that punishment clearly did not work for students with chronic behavior problems, but that their systems were not equipped to handle these students on campus. Three of the elementary principals discussed mental health issues they were seeing with students in kindergarten this school year and how it was an increase over previous years. The frustration and tendency to outsource support for these students so quickly may speak to the shifting focus in schools today from supporting just academics to supporting social-emotional learning as well.

**Summary Across Schools**

Once both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed for each school, they were compiled across all five schools to draw conclusions. Table 7 provides the relative differences in compositions and the top recorded codes for each principal.
Table 7
Relative Differences in Composition and Top Recorded Codes Across All Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>AA</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>Top Recorded Codes from Interview Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elem A</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>-44.7%</td>
<td><em>Taking Action</em>, <em>Professional Development</em>, <em>Redesign System</em>, <em>Impact of Study</em>, <em>Principal Aware of Disproportionality</em>, <em>Creating Culture</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elem B</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>-60.7%</td>
<td><em>Taking Action</em>, <em>Passive</em>, <em>Teacher Barrier</em>, <em>Principal Barrier</em>, <em>Principal Aware of Disproportionality</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle B</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>-47.5%</td>
<td><em>Principal Barrier</em>, <em>Discipline Reporting</em>, <em>Policy</em>, <em>Taking Action</em>, <em>Passive</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elem C</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>-44.3%</td>
<td><em>Relationships with Families</em>, <em>Relationships with Students</em>, <em>PBIS</em>, <em>Principal Aware of Disproportionality</em>, <em>Creating Culture</em>, <em>Redesign System</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle C</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>-7.3%</td>
<td><em>Principal Culturally Aware</em>, <em>Taking Action</em>, <em>Creating Culture</em>, <em>Relationships with Students</em>, <em>PBIS</em>, <em>Taking Action</em>, <em>Redesign System</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: AA = African American, W = White. A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of infractions for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the population. A positive value for difference in composition indicates the racial group is overrepresented in infractions when compared to the racial group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented. Top recorded codes represent those where a great portion of the data came from the participant.

Based on analysis of the data collected, there appears to be a connection between the relative differences in composition in student discipline between African American and White students and perceptions held by the principal. Based on study results, Elementary A had the smallest relative difference for African American students and is led by the principal who believed that it was her job to make sure her students received equitable opportunities and was taking action in many areas to ensure equity for all students. Middle B also had lower rates of relative difference for African American students, and is led by a principal who shared the
deepest knowledge of student culture in her building and whose leadership style is based on building caring relationships both with students and families. The remaining schools had significantly higher relative differences in composition for African American students, and are led by principals who described actions passively and were more focused on academics than behavior. The only exception here is Elementary C, which had the highest relative difference in composition scores for African American students, but was actively taking action to reduce disproportionate discipline in her school based on her own analysis of her 17-18 school discipline data. This work was evidenced by her report that they had already cut their discipline infraction rate in half over the previous year for all students and were actively working to reduce disproportionate rates. Further analysis of each school’s discipline data and responses from their principal provided deeper insight into the unique characteristics of each rural school setting.

**Findings for Individual Schools**

**Elementary A Findings**

*Quantitative Data*

Elementary A is a majority-minority school with 673 students in grades Pre-K – 4th grade. Sixty-three percent of its student body is categorized as part of a minority group (N=420). The total percentage of African American, White, and Other students is listed in Table 8. Also within the chart are the composite index scores for discipline incidents and enrollment, as well as the relative differences in composition.
Table 8
*Elementary A Enrollment and Discipline Infractions by Racial Group, 2017-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student racial group</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Composition of school enrollment (percent)</th>
<th>Number of discipline infractions</th>
<th>Composition of infractions by racial group (percent)</th>
<th>Difference in composition (percentage points)</th>
<th>Relative difference in composition of infractions and enrollment composition (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-17</td>
<td>-44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Difference in composition is the percentage point difference between the composition of two groups. (For example, composition of incidents for White students minus composition of White students in school enrollment: 21 – 38 = -17 percent.) A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of incidents for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the school population. (For example, difference in composition of incidents for White students/composition of White students in school enrollment x 100: -17/38 x 100 = -44.7 percent.) A positive value for difference in composition or relative difference in composition indicates a student group is overrepresented in incidents compared to the group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented. Na = not applicable because composition scores can only be calculated for subgroups.

Once the composition index score and relative differences for composition for infractions were calculated, the composition index score for discipline actions was calculated and compared to the percentage of population for each racial group. Figure 9 shows the composition index scores for population, infractions, and actions for each racial group.
Differences in composition were calculated between the composition of population, infractions, and actions for each race group and indicate levels of disproportionality based on population. Table 9 provides the differences.

Table 9: Composition Differences in Student Infractions and Actions in Elementary A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial group</th>
<th>Infractions</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-17%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population for each race.

In analyzing the overall composition of actions and infractions for students as compared to their percent of the total population, the largest area of disproportionality is the
underrepresentation of White students in both categories. This is followed by the percentages for students of Other races, and the lowest degree of disproportionality is for African American students when compared to the percentage of the population they comprise.

**Infractions.** Analysis of the types of infractions students received revealed further information about what types of infractions students were being referred for and the percentage of each race receiving each type of infraction. Elementary A reported 565 infractions during the 2017-2018 school year. Although there were twenty-five possible categories available to code infractions, only eleven had data reported. Of the eleven categories with data, the five most commonly used were analyzed for disproportionality to allow for comparisons between schools. The total number of infractions reported in Elementary A for the five categories were: Insubordination (N=51), Disorderly Conduct (N=230), Bullying (N=11), Fighting (N=29), and Other (N=41). The remaining 198 other infractions were reported in the following categories: Cell Phone, Cyber Bullying, Sexual Harassment, Public Displays of Affection, Stealing, and Terroristic Threatening.

To calculate the number of infractions per student overall, the number of referrals was divided by the number of students. Based on the total of 565 infractions, the rate is .8 of an infraction per student (less than one). When calculated by each racial group, the infraction rates are as follows: .9 infractions per African American student, .5 infractions per White student, and 1.5 infractions per Other race students. Based on these calculations, students of Other races have the highest infraction rate when compared to their percentage of the population, followed by African American students, and then by White students. The rate of referral for students of Other races is 1.3:1 when compared to White students, while African American students receive infractions at a rate of 2.4:1 when compared to White students.
Once the total number of infractions for each category was determined, the composition of each racial group receiving infractions was calculated. After percentages were calculated, composition differences were calculated to determine the difference that existed by infraction. Results are reported in Table 10.

Table 10
*Composition Differences by Type of Infraction in Elementary A*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Insubordination</th>
<th>Disorderly Conduct</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Fighting</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-18%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>-21%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of infractions students received, the highest degree of difference in composition overall was for African American students in all five categories. Significantly higher differences were noted in Insubordination, Disorderly Conduct, Fighting, and Other than in Bullying. Differences also exists by the type of infraction for White students, through a negative relationship. White students are underrepresented in each category when analyzed by the type of infraction. Underrepresentation for White students in Insubordination and Fighting is highest, which is also the same categories where the African American students were overrepresented. Differences for students in the Other race category are all within single digits of the percentage of the population they comprise.
**Actions.** Analysis of the types of actions students receive revealed further information about what types of actions students were assigned as a result of infractions and the percentage of each race receiving each type of action. The total number of discipline actions reported in Elementary A was 593. Actions for the following categories were: ISS (N=180), OSS (N=8), Corporal Punishment (N=54), and Other (N=132). The two actions with the highest use were ISS and Other. The remaining 155 actions were spread through other categories including warning, Saturday School, bus suspension, and parent conference. Once the total number of actions for each category was determined, the composition of each racial group receiving actions was calculated. After compositions were calculated, the difference in composition was calculated to determine the level of disproportionality that existed by action. Results are reported in Table 11.

Table 11
*Composition Differences by Type of Action in Elementary A*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>ISS</th>
<th>OSS</th>
<th>Corporal Punishment</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-48</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-19</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-12</td>
<td>-15</td>
<td>-15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* ISS = In School Suspension; OSS = Out of School Suspension. Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of actions students received, the highest degree of difference overall was in the OSS category. There were eight actions total in this category and all were for White students. The difference in African American students receiving ISS, Corporal Punishment, and Other as an action is highest when compared to the other students. White
students are underrepresented in all actions other than OSS, and students in the Other category are underrepresented in all categories except for Other actions.

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several areas that were explored further through two interviews with the principal including the disproportionate rates for African American students in each type of infraction, the underrepresentation of White students in both infractions and actions, the high incidence of Disorderly Conduct infractions, and the frequent use of ISS and Other as discipline actions for all students.

**Qualitative Data**

Two interviews were conducted with the principal of Elementary A to gain deeper insight into the discipline data as well as obtain her perspective on discipline, race, and disproportionality in her school. Elementary A’s principal has been the principal in the school for six years, and has spent a total of 17 years in the district. She is a white female and has only worked in District A during her career. She is an established member of the community and first moved into administration at the encouragement of the middle school principal. Throughout both interviews, the principal of Elementary A described actions that she had initiated in her school to improve outcomes for all students, including contracting with Solution Tree, a nationally-known professional development provider focused on implementing the professional learning community (PLC) process. She cited student- and school-level data as a source of information when determining needs and talked freely about discipline referral rates and the actions they were taking to reduce them. She was aware of her data and was able to pull it out to reference when speaking to me in interviews, and noted, “I feel safer if I have my data here to refer to” to ensure that she didn’t tell me any incorrect numbers. The top codes based on quantity of codes supplied for the principal of Elementary A are presented in Figure 10.
Elementary A’s principal was aware of disproportionate rates of discipline in her school and gave several examples of things they had done as a staff to combat those rates, resulting in *Principal Aware of Disproportionality* as a top code. One example was that she and her leadership team had analyzed the students who were their students with recurring infractions because they had multiple discipline referrals within a short amount of time. She stated that they determined that “all but three of the students were living in a single-parent home” and then detailed the plan the team came up with to support these students, including shifting testing responsibilities away from their counselor so she could spend more time with students in small group sessions, building empathy with all staff members by creating an awareness of students from single-parent homes, and implementing positive rewards for going without discipline referrals for a certain period of time. She also had reached out to resources within the state, including inviting the current Arkansas Teacher of the Year to speak to her staff about culturally
responsive teaching, taking advantage of workshops at the local Education Service Cooperative on poverty and behavior management, and worked on her own leadership skills by participating in all three years of the Arkansas Leadership Academy’s Master Principal program. Data collected about these actions resulted in a top code of *Taking Action – Creating Culture*.

One of the areas that Elementary A’s principal had experienced that the other principals did not mention was the backlash from the community because she was implementing specific strategies to reduce disproportionate discipline and suspensions for African American students. She detailed a recent experience where she was interviewed on the news for the work they were doing to support African American students, which caused parents within the community, both African American and White, to lash out using social media at one another and at the school for being “racist.” She said there has been racial tension in the community for years, and that people who don’t really understand what they are doing and how they are trying to support their students tend to be the ones who are the most vocal. This experience was unsettling for her as a leader, she explained, but she did not let it deter her from the work.

Hiring practices were mentioned several times during the interviews by Elementary A’s principal. She was aware that there was a mismatch between the demographics of her staff and students, with the majority of her staff being White female (one African American teacher). To combat that, she described a new initiative she was undertaking where she sent her African American teacher to a job fair at a historically African American university and used her as part of her efforts to recruit other African American teachers. She had secured two new African American teachers using this method for the next school year, and was eager to continue the practice. She said that they had begun focusing on this because the mismatch between staff and
student demographics had become clear during the equity audit they conducted as part of their work with Solution Tree.

Elementary A’s principal also detailed a comprehensive professional development plan for the 2018 - 2019 school year they had implemented as a result of their work with Solution Tree, resulting in *Taking Action - Professional Development* as a top code. The plan included on-site professional development and coaching by Solution Tree associates, an equity audit, a parent equity lab, a book study for all staff each month focused on implementing culturally responsive strategies in the classroom, instructional rounds where peers observe one another using the strategies, and constant data monitoring. Based on the data review, Elementary A’s principal noted that they had seen huge decreases in the number of student discipline referrals over the course of the year, and were on track to exceed their school improvement goal of reducing discipline referrals by 10% (they were currently reduced by 18% as of May 1 that year). As part of this work they also focused on learning to understand what their students’ home lives were really like, building solid relationships with all students, and digging in to figure out what could be at the root of a student’s behavior instead of just punishing them. She also explained that this work had been part of her own action research project that she was conducting for the Arkansas Leadership Academy’s Master Principal program, of which she was in the third and final year.

With regard to the discipline system in place at the school, Elementary A’s principal explained that their system has evolved from a system with no clear steps or categories during the 2017 - 2018 school year, to one that is more organized and clear cut. She detailed work they had just completed to define each discipline code so that all staff members had the same understanding of what each code meant, and was looking forward to implementing the work in the 2019 - 2020 school year. She expressed frustrations at having no clear direction from the
state for discipline coding prior to this year, and said that their data was likely incomplete due to multiple people coding discipline data using their own interpretation. She remarked:

But at the same time, what training have you had? Nobody ever sat down and said, "Define these behaviors, make sure that what we're entering in the eSchool matches up, or even data, for that matter.... Before this year, I wouldn't have been able to tell you, "Well, Pam, she's the one that has eight discipline referrals, so she's the one messed up our data."

The work of creating a more objective system and monitoring student discipline data was being taken on by her leadership team, as well as the teaching staff, resulting in Taking Action – Redesign System as a top code.

When presented with the disproportionality rates for her school based on 2017-2018 discipline data, her reaction was one of deep reflection. She asked many questions to make sense of the data, and also asked what the other schools in my study looked like. She wanted to know what her data from the most recent school year would look like using this type of disaggregation as well, and wanted to share it with her staff. She also expressed concern that she was just now seeing her data broken down this way, rather than years ago when she became a principal. She said:

Yeah. I can feel the tears in the very back. I mean, I'm not going to start crying or anything, but it's almost kind of sad, you know? That we've done this... Yes, we can do way better... the bottom line is we can do better...

She discussed being able to use the data generated in this study as a tool to help her staff see areas of improvement and also inquired about she could go about calculating data using the same process for the most recent school year to establish patterns of disproportionate discipline for them to analyze, resulting in Impact of Study as a top code. Her resolve to make positive changes for all students was apparent in both her words and in the concrete actions described throughout
the interviews and is also reflected in the data showing the lowest rates of disproportionate discipline for African American students of the schools in this study.

**Elementary B Findings**

**Quantitative Data**

Elementary B is a Pre-K – 2nd grade school with 481 students total. The percentage of African American, White, and Other students is listed in Table 12. Also within the chart are the composite index scores for discipline incidents and enrollment, as well as the relative differences in composition.

**Table 12**

*Elementary B Enrollment and Discipline Infractions by Racial Group, 2017-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student racial group</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Composition of school enrollment (percent)</th>
<th>Number of discipline infractions</th>
<th>Composition of infractions by racial group (percent)</th>
<th>Difference in composition (percentage points)</th>
<th>Relative difference in composition of infractions and enrollment composition (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-34</td>
<td>-60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Difference in composition is the percentage point difference between the composition of two groups. (For example, composition of incidents for White students minus composition of White students in school enrollment: 22 – 56 = -34 percent.) A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of incidents for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the school population. (For example, difference in composition of incidents for White students/composition of White students in school enrollment x 100: -34/56 x 100 = -60.7 percent.) A positive value for difference in composition or relative difference in composition indicates a student group is overrepresented in incidents compared to the group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented.
Once the composition index score and relative differences for composition for infractions was calculated, the composition index score for discipline actions was calculated and compared to the percentage of population for each racial group. Figure 11 shows the composition index scores for population, infractions, and actions for each racial group.

![Bar chart showing composition of population, infractions, and actions by race in Elementary B.](chart)

*Figure 11. Composition of population, infractions, and actions by race in Elementary B.*

Differences in composition were calculated between the composition of population, infractions, and actions for each race group and indicate levels of disproportionality based on population. Table 13 provides the differences.
Table 13
*Composition Differences in Student Infractions and Actions in Elementary B*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Infractions</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-34%</td>
<td>-34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population for each race.

In analyzing the overall composition of actions and infractions for students as compared to their percent of the total population, the largest area of disproportionality is the underrepresentation of White students in both categories. This is followed by the difference for African American students, and then the students of Other races when compared to the percentage of the population they comprise. One area to note here is that African American students had more actions than infractions, which indicates that some discipline actions were reported but may not have had a corresponding infraction reported. The students from Other races had lower differences in composition in infractions and actions than White or African American students.

**Infractions.** Analysis of the types of infractions students receive revealed further information about what types of infractions students were being referred for and the composition by race for each type of infraction. Elementary B reported 559 infractions during the 2017-2018 school year. Although there were twenty-five possible categories available to code infractions, only nine had data reported. Of the nine categories with data, the five most commonly used were analyzed for composition differences to allow for comparisons between schools. The total number of infractions reported in Elementary B for the five categories were: Insubordination
Almost all of the discipline infractions were reported as Disorderly Conduct, and both Bullying and Other reported zero infractions. The remaining 118 other infractions were reported in the following categories: Cell Phone, Cyber Bullying, Sexual Harassment, Public Displays of Affection, Stealing, and Terroristic Threatening.

To calculate the number of infractions per student overall, the number of referrals was divided by the number of students. Based on the total of 559 infractions, the rate is 1.2 infractions per student. When calculated by each racial group, the infraction rates are as follows: 1.9 infractions per African American student, .5 infractions per White student, and 3.7 infractions per Other race students. Based on these calculations, students of Other races have the highest infraction rate when compared to their percentage of the population, followed by African American students, and then by White students. The rate of infractions for students of Other races is .7:1 when compared to White students, while African American students receive infractions at a rate of 2.8:1 when compared to White students.

Once the total number of infractions for each category was determined, the composition of each racial group receiving infractions was calculated, followed by composition differences. Results are reported in Table 14.
Based on analysis of the types of infractions students received, the largest composition difference was for African American students in all three categories reporting data. In all three of the categories (Insubordination, Disorderly Conduct, and Fighting). Regardless of whether the incident category had a lower number of incidents (Insubordination, N=33) or a higher number (Disorderly Conduct, N=382), the degree of difference was similar for African American students. The degree of difference for White students in types of incidents was opposite from African American students and shows underrepresentation. These differences indicate that White students are underrepresented in infractions by type, whereas the African American students are overrepresented. There were zero incidents reported in any category for Other students.

**Actions.** Analysis of the types of actions students receive revealed further information about what types of actions students were assigned as a result of infractions and the composition by race receiving each type of action. The total number of actions reported in Elementary B was 535. Total actions for the following categories were: ISS (N=9), OSS (N=2), Corporal Punishment (N=15), and Other (N=416). The overwhelming majority of actions used in Elementary B was Other. The remaining 93 actions were spread across categories including

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### Table 14

*Composition Differences by Type of Infraction in Elementary B*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Insubordination</th>
<th>Disorderly Conduct</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Fighting</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-29%</td>
<td>-32%</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-26%</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Z = Zero incidents reported. Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.*
parent conference, warning, bus suspension, and detention. Once the total number of actions for each category was determined, the percentage of each racial group receiving actions was calculated. After compositions were calculated, the differences in composition were calculated to determine differences that existed by action. Results are reported in Table 15.

Table 15
Composition Differences by Type of Action in Elementary B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>ISS</th>
<th>OSS</th>
<th>Corporal Punishment</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-22%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
<td>-33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Z = Zero actions reported. Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of actions students received, the highest difference in composition overall was in the OSS category. There were two actions total in this category and both were for White students. The difference in African American students receiving ISS or Other as an action were similar, while the difference was lower for Corporal Punishment. The difference for Corporal Punishment was smaller for both White and African American students. White students were underrepresented in all actions other than OSS, and students in the Other category were underrepresented in all categories with zero actions being reported.

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several areas that were explored further through interviews with the principal and assistant principal of Elementary B, including the high composition differences for African American students in each type of infraction, the
underrepresentation of White students in both infractions and actions, the high incidence of Disorderly Conduct infractions, and the frequent use of Other as discipline actions for all students.

_Qualitative Data_

Both the principal and the assistant principal for Elementary B were interviewed as part of the qualitative data collection. Elementary B’s principal is White female who has been the principal for six years in the school. She has been in the district for close to twenty years, and has 38 years in education total. She served as a literacy coach in the school and at the state level under the Reading First grant before moving into administration. The assistant principal is also a White female who has been the assistant principal for the past 17 years in the school. She has a total of 23 years in education, and has taken a position as an elementary principal in a neighboring district for the 2019-2020 school year. The assistant principal was included in the interview process because she has been in the school for an extended period of time and has been responsible for discipline as a major component of her role during that time.

Interviews were conducted individually with each leader, but many similarities were noted in responses. Both administrators discussed declining population in their school and community as a stressor, as well as the increased mental health needs of students. However, not all responses were similar. In the area of racial tension, the principal was quick to point out examples of things that had happened at school that hinted of racial tension in the community and said that if it had not been there, issues at school would not be “blown out of proportion” like they have been where race is concerned. The assistant principal, on the other hand, noted that she didn’t believe racial tension existed in the community and instead said that she felt that poverty
was more of an issue in the community. Because both administrators work in the same school, their data was combined to determine top codes for the school (Figure 12).

**Figure 12.** Top codes (based on quantity) for principal and assistant principal of Elementary B.

The professional development described by both administrators at Elementary B centered on poverty. Both played a role in bringing in a national speaker to talk to the entire district about meeting the needs of students in poverty before school began for the 2018-2019 school year, and both expressed disappointment in how the staff of the district received the message. They felt that the teachers did not understand or care where their students were coming from, teachers were critical of the speaker herself, and the teachers didn’t believe that her message impacted their work. Because of the negative feedback, both felt that the session had probably done more harm than good in supporting students from homes of poverty. The assistant principal said that she had hoped to follow-up on the work throughout the year, but that it just hadn’t happened. This was the only outside source of professional development either administrator discussed, although they did share about focus areas within their school using internal resources such as
working to increase student attendance and implementing Science of Reading practices in their classrooms.

Both the principal and assistant principal were aware of a mismatch between their staff and student demographics, and reported that all of their teachers were White females, with the exception of the PE coach (male). When asked about hiring practices that might increase diversity among staff members, both said that they just didn’t have African American applicants. The assistant principal remarked:

  I think it's important to have diverse representation because students need to see someone who's "like me". We've been really unsuccessful in hiring any African American candidates… I don't know why they don't apply here. That's something we should be finding out.

The principal also stated that they had a school board member who would often ask why she didn’t have any African American teachers. Her answer was, “They just don’t apply.” She also discussed the difficulty they have hiring any teachers with a teacher shortage in the area, and the fact that they haven’t been able to hire for the past several years due to declining enrollment of students. With regard to celebrating or honoring diversity within the school, both leaders stated that they observe Black History month and that beyond that, they depend on the teachers to incorporate cultural activities into their classrooms as needed. Both leaders were aware of the disproportionate rates of discipline among their students, resulting in a top code of Principal Aware of Disproportionality. However, when prompted to go deeper about what could be done to reduce those rates, both leaders gave responses that were passive, resulting in a top code of Principal Taking Action – Passive.

Both administrators described their discipline approach as being one of teaching their students appropriate behaviors rather than punishing students and said they are well-aligned with one another in terms of their actions. The assistant principal described the discipline system as
being a tiered system that helps teachers know what to do in response to certain behaviors. The administrators take the students and teach them the appropriate behavior, rather than punishing the students and send them back to class. Both said they have more of a “counseling” approach and work closely with parents and the court system to help get students the support they need.

When asked about the number of referrals for the current year (2018-2019) as compared to 2017-2018, both remarked that the number was “ridiculous.” Further probing determined that they had made a concerted effort in the current year to document all discipline referrals, as opposed to previous years where only the most serious were entered into the discipline tracking system. As a result, they said they had experienced a huge increase in referral numbers and that they had many repeat offenders. They also noted an increase in the students coming to school with poor self-regulation skills, especially in kindergarten, and mental health needs. They relied heavily on outside mental health providers to meet the needs of these students, although there had been changes in the level of support each provider was able to give on-site. The assistant principal felt that one of the reasons why numbers had increased exponentially for student discipline in addition to the push to document all referrals was that they had not had time as a staff at the beginning of the school year to establish expectations and procedures for the teachers to use. She also felt that the school struggled to establish a professional culture where teachers were excited to learn and grow together. Data collected here resulted in a top code of Teacher Barrier.

In terms of the discipline data, both the principal and assistant principal for Elementary B said they track it weekly through a report provided to them by the secretary. However, there were some inconsistencies between what they noted before seeing their data and after. For example, the assistant principal said “I never mark Disorderly Conduct on a referral” and then after seeing the data and the high number for Disorderly Conduct, said, “Maybe I do mark it after all…”
Both were disturbed by the high number of referrals for African American students when compared to White students, and when looking at the disproportionality rates, the principal said, “I mean, I knew it was disproportionate, but didn't know it was this much disproportionate.” When questioned about why they believed the numbers were so disproportionate, both leaders cited the mismatch between the culture and background of their teachers versus those of their students. Both told stories of how they had stepped into discipline situations where a teacher was “lambasting” an African American student and they could see the student getting angrier and angrier. They believed that being proactive in preventing these situations and providing some kind of training for their teachers might help improve this, but had no concrete plans to do so at the time of the interview, resulting in a top code of Principal Barrier.

Although both leaders offered ideas of things that might help to improve rates of disproportionality among students, they offered very little in the way of concrete action steps they had taken or were taking. Instead they took a passive approach and shifted responsibility to others. For example, when asked about diverse hiring practices, they put the responsibility on the applicants and when asked about what they believed was causing disproportionate rates of discipline, they said the teachers didn’t know how to handle the students appropriately.

Professional development was viewed as a one-shot event, and there was little follow-through on plans made at the beginning of the year, even though both mentioned that it would have been helpful to do that. Although both leaders said they received a weekly report of discipline and attendance data from the secretary, neither shared how they were responding to the data other than on an individual student basis to seek out mental health services.

Elementary B had high differences in composition for African American students (overrepresented) and White students (underrepresented) in discipline infractions and actions
based on quantitative analysis. The data collected through interviews indicates that leaders are aware of some disproportionality among students and can pinpoint factors that may contribute to those rates, but cannot articulate actions they are taking to reduce them. This led to the conclusion that it’s not enough for a leader to be aware of disproportionate rates in their school to effect change. It follows that the leaders must be aware and also take actionable concrete steps to increase equity for all students.

**Middle B Findings**

**Quantitative Data**

Middle B is a 6th – 8th grade school with 417 students total, and is located in the same district as Elementary B. The percentage of African American, White, and Other students is listed in Table 16. Also within the chart are the composite index scores for discipline incidents and enrollment, as well as the relative differences in composition.
### Table 16
*Middle B Enrollment and Discipline Infractions by Racial Group, 2017-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student racial group</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Composition of school enrollment (percent)</th>
<th>Number of discipline infractions</th>
<th>Composition of infractions by racial group (percent)</th>
<th>Difference in composition (percentage points)</th>
<th>Relative difference in composition of infractions and enrollment composition (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-29</td>
<td>-47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Difference in composition is the percentage point difference between the composition of two groups. (For example, composition of incidents for White students minus composition of White students in school enrollment: 32 - 61 = -29 percent.) A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of incidents for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the school population. (For example, difference in composition of incidents for White students/composition of White students in school enrollment x 100: -29/61 x 100 = -47.5 percent.) A positive value for difference in composition or relative difference in composition indicates a student group is overrepresented in incidents compared to the group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented.

Once the composition index score and relative differences for composition for infractions were calculated, the composition index score for discipline actions was calculated and compared to the percentage of population for each racial group. Figure 13 shows the composition index scores for population, infractions, and actions for each racial group.
Figure 13. Composition of population, infractions, and actions by race in Middle B.

Differences in composition were calculated between the composition of population, infractions, and actions for each race group and indicate levels of disproportionality based on population. Table 17 provides the differences.

Table 17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Infractions</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-29%</td>
<td>-29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population for each race.
In analyzing the overall composition of actions and infractions for students as compared to their percent of the total population, the largest area of difference is the underrepresentation of White students in both categories. This is followed by the difference for African American students, and then the students of Other races when compared to the percentage of the population they comprise.

**Infractions.** Analysis of the types of infractions students receive revealed further information about what types of infractions students were being referred for and the composition by race receiving each type of infraction. Middle B reported 593 infractions during the 2017-2018 school year. Although there were twenty-five possible categories available to code infractions, only nine had data reported. Of the nine categories with data, the five most commonly used were analyzed for disproportionality to allow for comparisons between schools. The total number of infractions reported in Middle B for the following categories were: Insubordination (N=84), Disorderly Conduct (N=216), Bullying (N=26), Fighting (N=37), and Other (N=142). The bulk of the infractions were either Disorderly Conduct, followed by Other. The remaining 88 other infractions were reported in the following categories: Truancy, Student Assault, Cell Phone, Terroristic Threatening, Cyberbullying, Sexual Harassment, Public Displays of Affection, and Stealing.

To calculate the number of infractions per student overall, the number of referrals was divided by the number of students. Based on the total of 593 infractions, the rate is 1.4 infractions per student. When calculated by each racial group, the infraction rates are as follows: 2.4 infractions per African American student, .8 infractions per White student, and 2.2 infractions per Other race students. Based on these calculations, African American students have the highest infraction rate when compared to their percentage of the population, followed by
students of Other races, and then by White students. The rate of infractions for students of Other races is .25:1 when compared to White students, while African American students receive infractions at a rate of 1.8:1 when compared to White students.

The category with the highest number of infractions was Disorderly Conduct, followed by Other. Relatively small numbers of Bullying and Fighting infractions were reported. Once the total number of infractions for each category was determined, the composition of each racial group receiving infractions was calculated. After composition scores were calculated, differences in composition were calculated. Results are reported in Table 18.

Table 18  
*Composition Differences by Type of Infraction in Middle B*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Insubordination</th>
<th>Disorderly Conduct</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Fighting</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-34%</td>
<td>-23%</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>-32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of infractions students received, the highest difference in composition was in the category of Insubordination. Differences for both African American and White students are similar, although they are opposite one another, with African American students overrepresented and White students underrepresented. The same pattern was observed in the Other category. The differences between African American and White students in the other three categories (Disorderly Conduct, Bullying, and Fighting) also show an inverse
relationship, but the differences are somewhat lower. Differences for students in the Other race category are minimal, with few infractions being reported for students in this category.

**Actions.** Analysis of the types of actions students receive revealed further information about what students were assigned as a result of infractions and the composition by race for each type of action. The total number of actions reported in Middle B was 588. Total actions for the following categories were: ISS (N=107), OSS (N=54), Corporal Punishment (N=26), and Other (N=83). The action used most often was ISS, followed by Other. Smaller numbers of corporal punishment and OSS were reported. The remaining 318 actions were either detention or warning. Once the total number of actions for each category was determined, the composition by race was calculated, followed by differences in composition. Results are reported in Table 19.

Table 19
*Composition Differences by Type of Action*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>ISS</th>
<th>OSS</th>
<th>Corporal Punishment</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-34%</td>
<td>-35%</td>
<td>-11%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of actions students received, the largest difference overall was in both the ISS and OSS categories. The differences for both African American and White students were similar, although in opposition to one another. African American students were overrepresented while the White students were underrepresented at the same rate of difference.
The differences for the Other category of actions showed a similar relationship, although both differences were smaller. The same was true for Corporal Punishment, with similar differences that are the inverse of one another. The differences for the Other students’ category were minimal when compared to the percentage of the population they comprise. This data indicates that overall African American students are receiving discipline actions at much higher rates than expected given their percentage of the overall population, while White students are receiving much less discipline action than expected.

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several areas that were explored further through two interviews with the principal including the disproportionate rates for African American students in each type of infraction and action, the underrepresentation of White students in both infractions and actions, the high incidence of Insubordination infractions for African American students, and the frequent use of ISS as a discipline action for all students.

**Qualitative Data**

Two interviews were conducted with the principal of Middle B, who is a White male with ten years of experience in building-level administration. He has been the principal of Middle B for the past six years, and prior to that was an administrator in a neighboring district. He has also served in the military, and was called to active duty in the Middle East prior to serving as principal in this school. Although the principal for Middle B does not live in the community where his school is, he does live in a nearby rural community.

Middle B has been part of a PLC pilot program provide by the Arkansas Department of Education for the past two years, where the state pays for Solution Tree to work on-site with the campus over a three-year period. The 2017-2018 school year was the first year of the grant, and they are currently entering their third and final year. Middle B’s principal described the support
from Solution Tree as being very beneficial for his staff members and students, and said that they had made many academic gains since beginning the pilot program. He felt that there had been a reduction of discipline referrals since beginning with Solution Tree because of the increased academic performance, but he said that he hadn’t really looked at the numbers to verify. Solution Tree associates are on his campus several days each month and work directly with teams of teachers to implement changes. Although their work has not focused on student behavior for the first two years, he did state that they were going to be focusing more on behavioral interventions for students in the 2019-2020 school year. Top codes for Middle B are listed in Figure 14.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 14. Top codes (based on quantity) for principal of Middle B.*

As far as cultural celebrations, Middle B’s principal said they don’t really celebrate anything other than “African American History” month. He was quick to point out the there was a mismatch between the demographics of his staff (99% White and 1% African American) and his students, and that it had an effect on how the students behave at school. However, he did not articulate anything the school was doing or planned to do to make changes in this area, resulting
in a top code of *Taking Action – Passive*. He also discussed the impact of social media, single parent homes, and unemployment as factors in school discipline. With regard to the school discipline system, Middle B’s principal said that he has “zero tolerance for not following policy,” resulting in a top code of *Discipline Policy*. He states that he is very consistent in implementing policy so that all students are treated the same, regardless of who they see when they receive a discipline referral. He described his discipline system as a series of steps to be implemented with students, and once they have cycled through them, then a placement decision at an Alternate Learning Environment (ALE) within the district is usually made. When discussing discipline coding, he noted that the codes provided by the state are “wide-ranging” and leave themselves open for interpretation. Because of that, he felt that there was room for subjectivity in his discipline data and wasn’t entirely sure if the data were represented accurately or not. However, when we examined his data during the second interview, he felt that it was fairly accurate based on the students he sees. The data collected with regard to a lack of knowledge of the discipline data resulted in a top code of *Principal Barrier*. He also talked about the impact students with recurring infractions had on the discipline data. One of the frustrations he raised was not being able to have discipline data readily available for him to look at without going through eSchool and pulling up reports. Data collected in these areas resulted in a top code of *Discipline Reporting*.

Middle B’s principal asked many questions about the data and asked to share it with his staff to get their input as well. His main focus was what is causing the disproportionate rates and how they could better work to reduce the numbers of referrals and the disproportionality. He felt that the students perhaps don’t know what’s expected of them, which resulted in such high
numbers of referrals for certain student groups. He also felt that a lack of communication and parental involvement were part of the issue as well.

Both Elementary B and Middle B had high composition differences when compared to the other schools in this study for African American and White students. Most of the differences analyzed were high, with the African American students being overrepresented in discipline infractions at almost the exact same rate that the White students were underrepresented. The leaders at both schools also displayed similarities in how they perceived discipline in their schools, and shared little about concrete actions they were leading in their schools to reduce those rates. The top codes, based on quantity from all three leaders in the schools were similar as well. Both schools appeared to be more focused on student academic achievement rather than behavioral concerns with students, which may reflect the focus of District B, rather than priorities at the individual schools.

**Elementary C Findings**

*Quantitative Data*

Elementary C is a Pre-K – 4th grade school with 471 students total. The percentage of African American, White, and Other students is listed in Table 20. Also within the chart are the composite index scores for discipline incidents and enrollment, as well as the relative differences in composition.
Table 20
*Elementary C Enrollment and Discipline Infractions by Racial Group, 2017-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student racial group</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Composition of school enrollment (percent)</th>
<th>Number of discipline infractions</th>
<th>Composition of infractions by racial group (percent)</th>
<th>Difference in composition (percentage points)</th>
<th>Relative difference in composition of infractions and enrollment composition (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>-27</td>
<td>-44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Difference in composition is the percentage point difference between the composition of two groups. (For example, composition of incidents for White students minus composition of White students in school enrollment: 34 – 61 = -27 percent.) A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of incidents for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the school population. (For example, difference in composition of incidents for White students/composition of White students in school enrollment x 100: -27/61 x 100 = -44.3 percent.) A positive value for difference in composition or relative difference in composition indicates a student group is overrepresented in incidents compared to the group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented.

Once the composition index score and relative differences for composition for infractions was calculated, the composition index score for discipline actions was calculated and compared to the percentage of population for each racial group. Figure 15 shows the composition index scores for population, infractions, and actions for each racial group.
Differences in composition were calculated between the composition of population, infractions, and actions for each race group and indicate levels of disproportionality based on population. Table 21 provides the differences.

Table 21  
*Composition Differences in Student Infractions and Actions in Elementary C*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Infractions</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>-27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population for each race.

In analyzing the overall composition of actions and infractions for students, the largest area of difference is the underrepresentation of White students in both categories. This is
followed by the difference for African American students, and then the students of Other races when compared to the percentage of the population they comprise.

**Infractions.** Analysis of the types of infractions students receive revealed further information about what types of infractions students were being referred for and the composition by race receiving each type of infraction. The total number of infractions reported in Elementary C (N=902) for the following categories were: Insubordination (N=142), Disorderly Conduct (N=164), Bullying (N=84), Fighting (N=87), and Other (N=205). Elementary C reported 902 infractions during the 2017-2018 school year. Although there were twenty-five possible categories available to code infractions, only fourteen had data reported. Of the fourteen categories with data, the five most commonly used were analyzed for disproportionality to allow for comparisons between schools. The total number of infractions reported in Elementary C for the five categories were: Insubordination (N=142), Disorderly Conduct (N=164), Bullying (N=84), Fighting (N=87), and Other (N=205). The largest category of infractions was Other, followed by Insubordination and Disorderly Conduct. The remaining 220 other infractions were reported in the following categories: Truancy, Student Assault, Knife, Handgun, Cell phone, Sexual harassment, Cyber bullying, Terroristic threatening, Stealing, and Public Displays of Affection.

To calculate the number of infractions per student overall, the number of referrals was divided by the number of students. Based on the total of 902 infractions, the rate is 1.9 infractions per student. When calculated by each racial group, the infraction rates are as follows: 3.7 infractions per African American student, 1.1 infractions per White student, and 2.4 infractions per Other race students. Based on these calculations, African American students have the highest infraction rate when compared to their percentage of the population, followed by
students of Other races, and then by White students. The rate of infractions for students of Other races is .5:1 when compared to White students, while African American students receive infractions at a rate of 1.5:1 when compared to White students.

Once the total number of infractions for each category was determined, the composition by race of students receiving infractions was calculated, followed by composition differences. Results are reported in Table 22.

Table 22

*Differences by Type of Infraction in Elementary C*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Insubordination</th>
<th>Disorderly Conduct</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Fighting</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>-22%</td>
<td>-32%</td>
<td>-39%</td>
<td>-26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of infractions students received, the highest degree of difference in composition was in Fighting for African American students (45%). The composition of infractions for African American students in the other four categories are high, indicating overrepresentation in these areas. Infractions for Bullying, Fighting, and Other for White students are also high (but negative), showing that they are underrepresented in these infractions. Infractions for Disorderly Conduct and Insubordination for White students are also high. For the Other students’ category, all differences are minimal.
Actions. Analysis of the types of actions students receive revealed further information about what types of actions students were assigned as a result of infractions and the composition by race of students receiving each type of action. The total number of actions reported in Elementary C (N=887) for the following categories were: ISS (N=238), OSS (N=12), Corporal Punishment (N=81), and Other (N=213). The two actions with the highest use were ISS and Other. The remaining 220 actions were all warnings. Once the total number of actions for each category was determined, the composition by race receiving actions was calculated, followed by differences in composition scores. Results are reported in Table 23.

Table 23
Composition Differences by Type of Action in Elementary C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>ISS</th>
<th>OSS</th>
<th>Corporal Punishment</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>-61%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>-29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of actions students received, the highest difference overall was in the OSS category. There were twelve actions total in this category and none were for White students. The difference in African American students receiving ISS as an action is in the high, while the rate of actions for Corporal Punishment and Other is somewhat lower. White students are underrepresented in all actions, but to higher degrees in some categories. Differences were highest for ISS and Other, while lower for Corporal punishment for both White and African American students.
Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several areas that were explored further through two interviews with the principal including the composition differences for African American students in each type of infraction, the underrepresentation of White students in both infractions and actions, the high incidence of Other infractions, and the frequent use of ISS and Other as discipline actions for all students.

**Qualitative Data**

Two interviews were conducted with the principal of Elementary C, who is a White female in her eighth year as the principal at this school. She has been in the district for twenty-six years and didn’t graduate from college until she was 40. She has only worked in District C during her entire career in education. The principal of Elementary C shared in-depth information about the processes their school has gone through in the past few months to implement PBIS. She stated that prior to the 2017-2018 school year they had an average of 300 office referrals for students. However, in 2017-2018 they had almost 1000 referrals and since that time had been actively seeking resources to support their work in this area. Their superintendent wrote a grant for PBIS support through a state university, and they received the grant for the district. As a result, the administrators and teachers had already begun receiving training on full implementation and were working on their plan for the 2019-2020 school year. Data collected on this topic resulted in a top code of *PBIS* for the principal of Elementary C. Figure 16 provides a visual representation for the top codes for the principal of Elementary C, who had numerous codes with top numbers when compared to the other administrators.
Figure 16. Top codes (based on quantity) for principal of Elementary C.

District C is located in the same rural community as District B, although they traditionally have had the students residing in the county rather than those within the city limits, as well as the students from a small African American community about ten miles away. However, with school choice, they are now pulling more students from within the city limits. They have a very high poverty rate and as a district, have a philosophy of providing whatever their students need at school. They feed all of their students breakfast, lunch, and a snack each day, and also have a health clinic on-site for students and staff members that has been there for two years. For the 2019 - 2020 school year they are adding mental health services and a mental health nurse practitioner to the clinic to better meet the needs of their students. When asked about racial tensions in the community, the principal of Elementary C was quick to point out that they felt the effects of them in their school. She said that even though they had a relatively small percentage of African American students, there were definite tensions among students and with
parents. She also explained how her experiences in the classroom had helped her to understand more about the African American culture and how not to treat students at school. She cited examples of how you must deal with their discipline privately and not embarrass or disrespect these students in any way, resulting in a top code of *Principal Culturally Aware*. Although she was able to articulate the nuances of her students’ behavior and how it was likely influenced by hidden cultural norms, she did mention several times that many of her teachers still didn’t understand this.

In terms of hiring practices, the principal of Elementary C has the most aggressive plan for hiring teachers from diverse backgrounds, resulting in five African American teachers in a staff of thirty-five certified teachers. When asked about how she secures African American teachers, she talked about how she intentionally recruits them. She said that the most successful way for her to hire African American teachers is by hiring student teachers who have interned at her school. Because this school is located in close proximity to a local university, students are often eager to do their student teaching in her school. Once they intern there and she sees what kind of a teacher they are, she said that she works to actively recruit them. She gave the example of one intern who had gone to teach in another district for thirteen years, but that she called her every year and offered her a job. She finally came back and is one of her teachers now. All of the African American teachers currently teaching in her school were interns or in the AmeriCorps program at her school in the past, and she intentionally recruited them to increase the diversity of her teaching staff and reduce disproportionality.

The school has implemented several changes over the past year to their discipline system in an effort to reduce the number of student discipline referrals. These changes include creating a tiered system of behaviors and consequences, so that teachers know when to send students to the
office and when to handle the issue on their own, creating a matrix of positive behavioral expectations for each setting in the school, and by consistently using their discipline processes. She said several times that she has been very consistent this year in sending students back to the classroom who were written up for minor infractions and asked the teacher to fully implement the process correctly. When asked about if the changes had made a difference, she stated:

It's been better this year. We've had a lot fewer referrals because I've tightened up on if I get a referral and it's not completed, like no date or if it's very unclear what's happened, or if I feel like it's Tier one, I send it right back and I'll send a copy of the matrix.

By the end of the 2018 - 2019 school year, they had cut their referral rate from having almost 1000 student referrals to having only 500. They are continuing to implement changes and revise their processes and matrix for the 2019 - 2020 school year, but she was hopeful about PBIS and focusing on the positives for students. They are also working to tighten up on the coding of discipline infractions better than they have in the past. She said that in the past, the teachers marked the type of infraction, and that if she felt it didn’t represent it, then she or the secretary would change it. She also remarked that the “Other” category was too vague and was of no help to them in analyzing their data. She said they were going to try not to use the “Other” category at all this year. One of the positives that she noted really helps with discipline is the presence of cameras in all of their classrooms. She said that this has helped her to get very accurate data on incidents and feel confident when investigating them. Other changes they are planning on implementing for the 2019 - 2020 school year include eliminating the use of corporal punishment as part of their discipline system, in large part due to a new law that went into effect saying that schools could not utilize corporal punishment with students with disabilities. Data collected here resulted in a top code of Taking Action – Redesigning System.
Students with recurring infractions played a role in the data as well. She gave the example of one student who spent 54 days in ISS the previous school year, and had close to 100 discipline referrals. He was an African American male, and because the African American population is relatively small, it’s possible that his data alone is skewing the numbers of disproportionality for her school.

The principal of Elementary C was also aware of the disproportionate rates in her school and noted that often her ISS room is full of students who are African American. During the interview she said, “Let me check my list for today (finds the list) … Yes, all of the students in ISS today are African American.” When asked about the cause of more African American students being in ISS than White students, given that the total African American population of the school is 29%, she cited the cultural differences between the teaching staff and the students. She said:

I think it's the difference in expectations in culture. It really is. A lot of us are older White women. We grew up in a time when things were black and white, and it's just, from our experiences, we can't imagine what their experiences are like growing up, and that's another reason that I worked at the beginning of the year a lot on being culturally responsive to our kids.

These data resulted in a top code of Principal Aware of Disproportionality and Principal Culturally Aware.

When compared to the other schools in this study, the difference in composition is highest of all schools for African American students. However, based on data collected during interviews, it appears that the principal took action within a year of realizing their discipline system was not being effective and has continued to take steps each year. The principal is asking questions and wants to make a difference. While viewing her data, she remarked:
I think there are a lot of disproportionate write ups, and consequences, too. What do we do? What do we do about it? What can do? Can we change the behavior, or change our perception, or even change one of our parent's perception, too?

She also mentioned several times how important it is to filter discipline referrals for bias and to make sure that decisions being made are focused on hard evidence, such as what she sees on the cameras. She has concrete plans to train her teachers in how to deal with different cultures and how to implement positive behavior supports for all of her students, which resulted in a top code of Taking Action – Creating Culture. As part of creating culture, she also mentioned the steps she and her staff were taking to intentionally build strong relationships with their students and parents, including providing for all of their needs, going to visit them at home often, and spending time in the community promoting reading and education. The data collected her resulted in top codes of Relationships with Students and Relationships with Families.

**Middle C Findings**

**Quantitative Data**

Middle C is a 5th – 8th grade school with 299 students total. The percentage of African American, White, and Other students is listed in Table 24. Also within the chart are the composite index scores for discipline incidents and enrollment, as well as the relative differences in composition.
Table 24  
Middle C Enrollment and Discipline Infractions by Racial Group, 2017-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student racial group</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Composition of school enrollment (percent)</th>
<th>Number of discipline infractions</th>
<th>Composition of infractions by racial group (percent)</th>
<th>Difference in composition (percentage points)</th>
<th>Relative difference in composition of infractions and enrollment composition (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Difference in composition is the percentage point difference between the composition of two groups. (For example, composition of incidents for White students minus composition of White students in school enrollment: 21 – 38 = -17 percent.) A relative difference in composition is the difference between the proportion of incidents for a racial group and the representation of the racial group within the school population. (For example, difference in composition of incidents for White students/composition of White students in school enrollment x 100: -17/38 x 100 = -44.7 percent.) A positive value for difference in composition or relative difference in composition indicates a student group is overrepresented in incidents compared to the group’s representation in the total student population, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented.

Once the composition index score and relative differences for composition for infractions was calculated, the composition index score for discipline actions was calculated and compared to the percentage of population for each racial group. Figure 17 shows the composition index scores for population, infractions, and actions for each racial group.
Differences in composition were calculated between the composition of population, infractions, and actions for each race group and indicate levels of disproportionality based on population. Table 25 provides the differences.

Table 25
*Composition Differences in Student Infractions and Actions in Middle C*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Infractions</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions or actions than the percentage of population for each race.

In analyzing the differences in composition of actions and infractions for students, the largest difference is for African American students, followed by the underrepresentation of
White students in both categories. This is followed by students of Other races, which has a minimal difference. Middle C’s differences in composition for infractions and actions are significantly smaller than the other four schools included in this study.

**Infractions.** Analysis of the types of infractions students receive revealed further information about what types of infractions students were being referred for and the composition by race of students receiving each type of infraction. Middle C reported 664 infractions during the 2017-2018 school year. Although there were twenty-five possible categories available to code infractions, only fourteen had data reported. Of the fourteen categories with data, the five most commonly used were analyzed for differences to allow for comparisons between schools. The total number of infractions (N=664) reported in Middle C for the following categories were: Insubordination (N=62), Disorderly Conduct (N=71), Bullying (N=35), Fighting (N=31), and Other (N=310). Almost half all of the discipline infractions were reported as Other, with the other categories having relatively smaller numbers. The remaining 155 other infractions were reported in the following categories: Drugs, Truancy, Vandalism, Cell Phone, Cyberbullying, Sexual Harassment, Public Displays of Affection, Stealing, Terroristic Threatening, and Knife.

To calculate the number of infractions per student overall, the number of referrals was divided by the number of students. Based on the total of 664 infractions, the rate is 2.2 infractions per student. When calculated by each racial group, the infraction rates are as follows: 2.8 infractions per African American student, 2 infractions per White student, and 1.9 infractions per Other race students. Based on these calculations, African American students have the highest infraction rate when compared to their percentage of the population, followed by students of Other races, and then by White students. The rate of infractions for students of Other races is 1:1.
when compared to White students, while African American students receive infractions at a rate of .5:1 when compared to White students.

Once the total number of infractions for each category was determined, the composition by race of students receiving infractions was calculated, followed by composition differences. Results are reported in Table 26.

Table 26
*Differences by Type of Infraction in Middle C*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>Insubordination</th>
<th>Disorderly Conduct</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Fighting</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of infractions students received, the highest difference of composition overall was for African American students in three categories (Bullying, Fighting, Other). However, in Insubordination and Disorderly Conduct, the differences were minimal. This is different from all four of the other schools included in the study. The differences for White students in Insubordination and Disorderly Conduct are minimal, but they are positive differences, whereas negative differences were observed in all the other schools. The differences for the remaining categories for White and Other students are all negative values but are small, showing that they are underrepresented given the percentage of the student population they comprise.
**Actions.** Analysis of the types of actions students receive revealed further information about what types of actions students were assigned as a result of infractions and the composition by race of students receiving each type of action. The total number of actions reported in Middle C (N=657) for the following categories were: ISS (N=210), OSS (N=33), Corporal Punishment (N=39), and Other (N=81). The remaining actions (N=294) were all detention or warnings. The action used most frequently was assignment to ISS. Once the total number of actions for each category was determined, the composition by race of students receiving actions was calculated, followed by composition differences. Results are reported in Table 27.

Table 27
*Differences by Type of Action in Middle C*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Racial Group</th>
<th>ISS</th>
<th>OSS</th>
<th>Corporal Punishment</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Z = Zero actions reported. Differences were calculated based on the percentage of the total population each race comprised and the total percentage of infractions by race. Positive values represent a higher percentage of infractions than the percentage of population each race comprises, while negative values represent a lower percentage of infractions than the percentage of population for each race.

Based on analysis of the types of actions students received, the largest difference overall was in the OSS category for African American students. The difference for Other students is also relatively small as a negative value. There were zero actions for Other students in both categories. The percentages for White students in ISS, Corporal Punishment, and Other are all minimal, which is different from the other schools in the study. All of the differences in composition are in the single digits.
Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several areas that were explored further through two interviews with the principal including the disproportionate rates for African American students in each type of infraction, the slight underrepresentation of White students in both infractions and actions, the high incidence of Disorderly Conduct infractions, and the frequent use of ISS and Other as discipline actions for all students.

**Qualitative Data**

Two interviews were conducted with the principal of Middle C, who is a White female finishing her fourth year as principal in the school. She has been in this district for the past seven years, and has thirty-one years of experience in education. She has extensive experience working with African American students in the region, and before coming to District C, she worked as a teacher and literacy facilitator in several surrounding districts with a majority of African American students and staff members. Figure 18 is a visual representation of the top codes for Middle C’s principal.

*Figure 18. Top codes (based on quantity) for principal of Middle C.*
The staff of Middle C is almost all White, but there is one African American teacher who teaches Special Education. The principal doesn’t do any special outreach to recruit African American teachers, but noted that the principal of Elementary C was very successful at being able to hire them in her school. She did note, however, that she had done her own research on respect and relationships with African American students while pursuing a graduate degree and that she was very particular about how teachers handled her students. She said:

I'm very particular about how kids are handled and... that’s been hard. I don't like them to be screamed at. Now, I'm firm with these kids, but I feel like if I respect them, they'll respect me.

This data resulted in a top code of *Principal Culturally Aware*. Like the principal of Elementary C, she discussed the implementation of PBIS as a district-wide initiative and the work they had done to create a matrix with expectations clearly laid out for students (*PBIS, Taking Action – Redesigning System*). She also discussed how their teachers have been working to create lesson plans to explicitly teach expectations and school behaviors. She felt hopeful about the focus on positive behavior and thinks that the changes start first with them, rather than the students (*Taking Action – Creating Culture*). She also discussed how they were implementing new data measures including having all teachers review their discipline write-ups from the previous year to determine trends and patterns, having the leadership team regularly monitor and disaggregate discipline data instead of just the principal doing it, and revising their discipline referral form to give them better information about infractions, location of the incident, and the time of day. Her hope was that these new measures being implemented along with PBIS would make great reductions in their student referral rates.

The principal of Middle C also talked about how important it is to truly build relationships with students who are having behavior problems and that sometimes, you have to
go the extra mile for them. She told the story of a student who had serious behavior problems and had been in the Alternate Learning Environment (ALE) for most of the year, which is a consortium that they participate in with District B. He had reached the point at ALE where the director called and said he wasn’t going to be able to return because of his discipline issues. She knew that he wouldn’t do well back in her school, but she didn’t want to see him expelled where he would lose the entire year. Since he didn’t live in her district, she told the parent that he should return to his home school (Middle B), and finish out the year. Then he could return the next year. However, she then found out that the Superintendent of District B was going to expel the student without letting him return to Middle B. To prevent that from happening, she worked out a deal with her Superintendent to bring him back to her campus and place him in ISS with an aide for the remainder of the year so he could complete his education. This was one example of the lengths that this principal was willing to go to in support of her students with discipline problems, and she said that other parents would come to her and tell her how much they trusted her because they saw how much she cared for their students (Relationships with Students).

Middle C had discipline rates that were almost proportionate in all categories for all students. The composition differences were very small, making this school’s data an outlier when compared to the other schools in the study. When asked if the size of the school could be a determining factor, she said:

It could be. having less than 80, 85 kids or fewer in each grade… I know these kids more than if I had seven hundred fifty of them or eight hundred of them or you know, a large middle school in Little Rock or whatever. It’s just I have gotten to know their parents and their parents trust me and that’s a big deal.

Another determining factor making the difference in this school could be the extensive experience this principal has in teaching African American students and working with colleagues who are African American. One thing the Principal of Middle C was interested in knowing was
how students with recurring infractions were affecting the data and if her data from the 2018 - 2019 school year would look the same. This principal was committed to making whatever changes were needed to ensure that all students in her school received an equitable opportunity at school.

Chapter Summary

The data collected in this study provided deep insight into the understanding of the beliefs, practices, and perspectives of each principal in these schools, as well as the effects of their discipline systems on both African American and White students for the target year. Chapter Four explained in detail the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data collection across all schools, as well as an in-depth description of the findings for each individual school. The next chapter provides a discussion of the findings in light of the research questions and conceptual framework and concludes with implications for professional practice and future research.
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline for African American students compared to White students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. Chapter Five was designed to interpret the data collected from the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) and building leaders interviewed in the study concerning student discipline disproportionality in the selected rural schools. The interpretations in this chapter represent analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from three different sources: (1) Student and school demographic data collected from the MySchoolInfo website, provided by ADE to the public; (2) Student discipline infraction and action data obtained from ADE through a data request; and (3) Two rounds of semi-structured interviews with five principals and one assistant principal in the selected schools. This chapter is organized around the two research questions proposed throughout the study: (1) How is discipline disproportionality defined in rural schools from the principal’s perspective? and (2) What factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality from the principal’s perspective?

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to address the research questions. Data collection and analysis began with the quantitative data first, consisting of the relative differences in composition for both African American and White students in the schools studied. Composition index scores and relative differences in composition for discipline infractions were calculated using each school’s discipline data for the 2017-2018 school year and provided by ADE to provide an overall picture of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students in each school. The qualitative portion of the study followed an
instrumental collective case study approach, focused on the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline between African American and White students in five rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. Informed by the results of analysis of the quantitative data from each school, two rounds of interviews were conducted with each building leader and analysis resulted in the identification of major themes and subthemes.

Chapter Five begins with a discussion of each research question, informed by quantitative and qualitative data collected and analyzed throughout the study. After discussion of the research questions is a discussion of the conceptual framework, followed by the limitations and delimitations of the study, concluding with implications for current practice and future research.

**Research Questions**

**Research Question 1: How is Discipline Disproportionality Perceived in Rural Schools from the Principal’s Perspective?**

The perceptions of the principal can have a great impact on their school, given that they are placed in a position of authority and make decisions that affect many students (DeMatthews et. al, 2017). Skiba et al. (2012) found that schools led by principals who supported alternatives to suspension were less likely to suspend students. Principal beliefs about students, success, culture, and discipline are often reflected in the decisions they make and impact the culture of the school.

**Awareness of Disproportionate Discipline**

Principals perceived disproportionality in different ways throughout the study. All six leaders were quick to point out that they were aware of disproportionalities by race, specifically mentioning that they see African American students more than they see any other race. However, among the participants there was a range of the depth of awareness of disproportionate discipline
in their school. At one end of the spectrum was a principal who had been recommended by the Arkansas Secretary of Education to be interviewed on television for her work in reducing disproportionate rates of discipline for student in her school, while at the opposite end was a principal who said that he hadn’t really checked into the rate since he had been an assistant principal (six years prior), although he knew rates were still disproportionate by race. The other leaders fell in between those two extremes, but all freely discussed the fact that they knew their discipline rates were disproportionate with African American students being disciplined more often than White students. The only exception here was the principal of Middle C, who stated, “I don’t really think my discipline is disproportionate, to be honest.” Her feelings were fairly accurate, as the smallest differences in composition for African American students were noted in her school.

**Perceptions of Degree of Disproportionate Discipline**

Although principals were aware of disproportionate rates (albeit at differing levels of depth and reflection), some were not aware of the degree of disproportionality given the portion of the population each group comprised in their school. The composition index scores and differences in composition were effective in helping them to analyze in numeric form what their discipline rates looked like for the target year in a way they had not looked at them before. Several expressed surprise to see such large gaps between the percentage of the population and percentage of infractions or actions for each group. One remarked, “I mean, I knew it was disproportionate, but didn't know it was this much disproportionate.” Another said, “When you break it down like this, it’s a real eye-opener.” All of the principals expressed an interest in having the data from the current school year disaggregated using composition index scores and difference in composition for them to be able to share with their staff members and begin to track
the rates over time. None of the principals in this study were aware of how to calculate composition scores on their own, although they expressed an interest in learning the process to use with future data. One principal expressed frustration at the fact that she was just now seeing how to look at her data in this way by saying, “But the sad thing is, you don't learn any different. You know what I'm saying? Here I am, I think I'm going on year seven as a principal. Seven years? Come on!” This suggests that principals could benefit from training to help them understand how to calculate their own composition scores or from having a data management system that specifically provided this information using current data.

**Reactions to Disproportionate Discipline Rates**

In viewing the differences in composition for their own school during the interviews, differing reactions from principals were noted. One principal shared that it was emotional for her to see her data this way, and noted,

Yeah. I could feel the tears in the very back. I mean, I'm not going to start crying or anything, but it's almost kind of sad, you know? That we've done... Yes, we can do way better, but... The bottom line is we can do better, and that, I know.

Another principal mentioned, “I'm not happy with the disproportionate rates,” upon being presented with the data, while another said,

It's very alarming to see that this number of Black students are in trouble… I think we need to really start looking at that and trying to determine are they in trouble? Are they really breaking rules in orderly environments? Are they really causing this much of a problem or do we just not know how to work with them effectively? It's very alarming. It bothers me to tell you the truth. I don't like for anyone to be treated unfairly. I've always tried to be equitable and make sure that I'm doing right by kids and by people in general. This is very much a concern, and I know the principal was concerned about it too because she did mention that it was really bad.

The reactions of these leaders show that although they knew one group of students was being disciplined more often than others, they were not aware of how severe the differences were.
Some expressed dismay and concern, and raised many questions as to why this was happening in their school. They were obviously concerned by their data and felt that something should be done to correct it. However, they also recognized that this is a complex issue, and that solutions may not come easily. One, upon seeing the data remarked,

My impressions or thoughts... I really have none because there’s so many different other factors that could be, you know, considered because of that. Yeah, of course, you can see there’s a whole lot more referrals of African Americans than there are whites, percentage-wise. It makes you wonder why that is? Is it because there are more disruptions and, from African Americans, or is it a viewpoint of the referees, or the referrers who's actually making the referrals?

These questions indicate that the leader is thinking about why these rates are occurring in his school, but is unsure of the root cause.

Overall principal perceptions of disproportionate rates indicate that they see it as a problem that needs to be fixed in their schools, although they aren’t sure how to tackle the issue effectively. Throughout the interviews all leaders asked the researcher to share any findings with them after the study that would help them to reduce their rates, because they were interested in making positive changes. These findings are consistent with those of DeMatthews et. al (2017) who found that principals who are aware of injustices in their schools don’t always act in ways to correct those them. Although some of the principals who were aware were engaged in activities focused on changing these outcomes for students, others were aware, but had no plans to change their discipline system or provide support to their teachers in dealing with student discipline in the classroom.
Research Question 2: What Factors Are Most Influential in Explaining Discipline Disproportionality from the Principal’s Perspective?

With regard to the factors that are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality, principals cited cultural mismatch between teachers and students as the primary reason, with student trauma and mental health issues as the other biggest reason.

*Cultural Mismatch*

When asked, principals reported that they believed the biggest factor contributing to disproportionate rates of discipline in their school was a cultural mismatch, particularly between their teachers and the students. They knew that the teaching staff in each school did not represent the demographics of the student body, and two principals talked about ways they were actively recruiting a more diverse teaching staff. This finding is consistent with the work of Townsend (2000) and Ferguson (2001) whose work suggests that the prevalence of a White, female teaching force and their lack of understanding of African American males is a cause of disproportionate rates of discipline in schools. However, they felt that the biggest way that the cultural mismatch played out was in the classroom with teacher and student interactions. They told discipline stories where they had to calm students down after teachers had caused situations to escalate, and that when they took the time to really listen to the students, they found that the teachers often were making assumptions about students and behavior. These actions led them to believe that some of their teachers had a lack of understanding about the cultures of their students and their own personal biases. One principal said,

But I think there's a disconnect with teachers and their understanding of the African American male population and the female population, about the culture, about how to address... we've talked about this and talked about this, but I think there's still a disconnect with our population of teachers about how to address these things. Because I think it gets out of control really, really fast. Because I'm like, you know, “You need to watch how you
say things to the students… your demeanor, how you express yourself, not only in words, but your body language, everything, how you…”

In addition to a lack of understanding of the different cultures of their students, principals also believed that their teachers lacked the skills to deal appropriately with students in discipline situations. They said that some teachers will yell back when a student yells at them, that they often trigger kids and escalate situations with their own behavior and responses, the don't take the time to find out what really happened in a discipline situation which often leads to them assuming the problem student did it (even when it's proven they did not). One principal said,

You’ve got to understand their culture sometime. African American males, a lot of them…it’s fight or flight mode for them a lot of the times. A lot of that comes from home and survival at home. Often in their home and their community, the pastime is to tear down each other and ridicule each other and tease each other. It's a cultural thing. I guess a way of toughening them up. I don’t know.

When teachers witness this type of behavior and intervene, they come into direct contact with cultural beliefs, often unknowingly, and react based on their beliefs. Students become angry because they are being punished for acting this way at school, when at home the behavior is acceptable. They often argue with the teacher and lash out at them, and sometimes call their teachers “racist.” The words principals used to describe these situations with students included "battle with kids", "lambast them" in front of other students, and that teachers often "brow-beat" kids. One principal noted,

Relationships, in the end, just that trust and then letting them have a voice and say…like, I had one just a little while ago who was yelling out in the front. So I went out and… I think how some people handle the situation. Like kids start yelling, they started yelling back. I've learned that's not the way to do it. You just got to give them a minute. You've got to know your kids. And we have so many that are… You trigger them.

These kinds of combative interactions can be exacerbated when the teachers aren’t aware of their students’ cultures and how their actions are being interpreted by the students. Once
interactions like this happen, the teachers are more likely to send them to the office and less likely to want to work with the student on their behavior. Although all principals described behaviors like this from some of their teachers, they were quick to point out that this doesn’t represent all of their teachers. They knew which teachers tended to refer students of a certain race, and expressed frustration that these teachers did not know how to handle their students. However, only one principal of the six interviewed had actually provided professional development for her teachers on cultural responsiveness. This finding is consistent with the work of Gregory and Weinstein (2008), who found that the style of classroom management for some teachers had a significant effect on the discipline outcomes for African American students.

The cultural mismatch also related to parent relationships with the school. Principals noted that they felt parents did not show much support for the school with regard to discipline, and were quick to ask what was happening to the other students involved in a discipline incident rather than focus on how to help their own child. The Principal of Elementary C noted that there was a distrust of the school by the African American community, and that they were often labeled “racist” when they disciplined African American students by parents and students or when they tried to take actions to support African American students. She discussed a portion of her student population from one smaller community that had been consolidated with her school many years prior. In this community she noted,

It's a very different culture. It's not a culture that I'm really familiar with that much, but I need to be more familiar with. There's some great people over there, some great families over there, and I have built some great relationships with a lot of the families. But there's still a few that are very distrustful, and they feel like we're racist, that we don't care about their kids. Some of that comes out of nowhere.

She went on to talk about the importance of spending time outside of school in the community to build relationships with families and to build that trust. Even though she’s been doing that for
several years, she still felt that there was distrust from the parents in the community and attributes it to differences in culture.

The principal of Elementary A, who had been interviewed in the local media for her efforts to reduce inequities between African American and White students in discipline in her school was also labeled as “racist” by parents from both groups. She felt that her work had caused a race war in the community, with both sides crying foul. She noted,

    I guess before maybe people would have denied what they saw, I don't know, but, yes, we're saying there's a problem and here are some things we want to do about it, but now what I'm saying, it's like they don't want that either. Some know that we're doing the right work…And I had one that got on social media and lambasted me and everything. But, I'm the type of person, I'm just going to call you and say my piece and explain it to you and try to educate you.

It’s clear that confronting racial equity head-on is tough work for principals in rural areas, and that few are willing to take it on. However, it appears that whether the school ignores the issue or tries to address it, the principals still end up being called “racist” by one or more factions in their community.

The cultural mismatch was also mentioned with regard to the school system itself by a few of the principals. One said, “The way we do business, I think, is in itself a barrier for the students that we have today.” From the teaching methods we use in the classrooms to the ways we address misbehavior, some felt that our expectations were too far off from what the students themselves deal with in their homes. One principal noted,

    I don't know. A big thing with our black males is respect, and if they feel any kind of slighted, or disrespect from anybody, teacher or students, they lash out a lot. It's not all of them. It's just those few that had the most social problems is what I call … they don't have the social skills that a lot of kids have. Or they don't have the appropriate social skills that we I guess connect with our culture that's going to be successful.
Although several were involved with redesigning their systems, only the principal of Elementary C mentioned that the system itself might be causing disproportionality and was redesigning her system to address it. The teaching strategies used in classrooms were also mentioned as a possible cause of disproportionate rates. Another principal said,

Our delivery method... when you have to be explicit and systematic... It's "Be quiet and listen to me," and then you rehearse it. Students really struggle with that so that's something that we have that's... We've got to change the way we do business.

Some of the principals were engaged in the work of changing their systems to be more responsive to student needs and less punitive, but not all were. In fact, some that recognized that the system itself was a barrier had not taken any concrete actions to change their discipline systems, even when they knew it was a barrier for some students. Rather than changing the system, some preferred to deal with students on a case-by-case basis and get to the “root of their issue” rather than changing how discipline and culture are perceived as a whole in their school.

**Student Trauma and Mental Health Issues**

Another factor in disproportionate discipline rates mentioned by principals was that of student trauma. Based on a survey by Sacks and Murphey (2018), Arkansas ranks highest of all states in the percent of children who have been subjected to adverse childhood experiences (ACES). Common ACES include exposure to drug use in the home, verbal abuse, domestic violence, divorce, neglect, and having an incarcerated parent. They found that on average, 60% of children in Arkansas have experienced at least one ACE, while the average for the nation is 45%. In Arkansas, one in seven children has experienced more than three ACES, which also places the state in the high-risk category. They attribute the large number of rural communities in the state as a contributing factor to the high number of ACES, due to the level of stress experienced in poverty. They also found that different races do not experience ACES at the same
rate. Nationally, 61% of African American students have experienced at least one ACE, while only 40% of White students have. The principals with kindergarten students in their building were especially aware of the impact of ACES and mentioned that they are seeing traumatized students more and more each year. One principal said, “If I haven't wrestled a kindergartner every day, I haven't done my job. They're just so traumatized. They're just like… it’s heartbreaking.” Drug use, addiction, and poverty is the reason these principals believe so many of their students are coming to school with trauma, which leads to a lack of coping skills, trust, and insecurity on the part of students.

Closely related to student trauma and often overlapping with it were the mental health issues that students are dealing with in schools. For those students with repeated discipline referrals in a short period of time, the school leaders talked about reaching out for mental health services to support these students. So many of the students with recurring infractions are dealing with some type of issue, whether it be trauma or mental health issues. One principal said when talking about how you deal with the growing numbers of students who struggle to behave on a daily basis,

That's what I told my husband the other day. He said, “How do you deal with that?” I said, “Well,” I said, “These kids can't help it. They're damaged goods.” And when they get to school they just can't, a lot of that stuff they can't help. They really can't so we try to get to the bottom of the problem with mental health. So trying to find quality help is the key.

The struggle to find quality help for students was one mentioned by several principals as well. Although they had access to numerous providers, they were quick to point out that not all services were effective with students and in some cases, could further traumatize students. One of the schools had a health clinic on campus and had made plans to add a nurse practitioner for the coming school year who specialized in mental health issues. The others talked of having to
build relationships with providers in the community and rely on them for support because the
school did not have the capacity to help these students. Juvenile court was also utilized to coax
parents into getting help for their child when they were not responding to school requests. It was
clear that most schools were not equipped to handle the types of serious behaviors they are
seeing from students, starting at the earliest ages. Principals noted that their counselors play a
huge role in helping students of trauma and those struggling with mental health issues, but that
they don’t always have the skills to provide what the students need.

Research has established that African American students are diagnosed with disabilities
such as mental retardation, emotional disturbance, and learning disabilities at higher rates than
White students. (Donovan & Cross, 2002; US Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). These
students also experience ACES at higher rates, which can lead to identification of a disability.
When these students encounter the middle class structures in place in schools, conflict often
occurs. With higher numbers of African American students being diagnosed with these types of
disabilities and needing support, it follows that the numbers of discipline infractions and actions
in schools are impacted as well. All principals, in discussing students with recurring infractions,
believed that African American males made up the majority of this group, which could be
skewing their overall disproportionality rates.

**Conceptual Framework Revisited**

In revisiting the conceptual framework for this study, the interaction of the discipline
policies and practices being utilized in schools (the discipline system), the training that the
administrators and teachers have had, particularly in culturally responsive techniques, and the
opportunities for implicit bias are all contributing to disproportionate rates of discipline in these
schools, in addition to the tenets of Critical Race Theory. Figure 19 is a visual representation of this framework.

![Figure 19. Conceptual Framework](image)

**Critical Race Theory**

When each of the four basic tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) noted by Delgado and Stefanic (2006) are layered upon the findings from this study, conclusions can be drawn. The first tenet, that racism is institutionalized in the United States, speaks directly to the discipline systems the schools have in place. The principals in this study recognized that the way we do business in our schools is a barrier for some students, especially those of color. From the instructional strategies being used in classrooms to the way teachers handle student misbehavior, principals noted that many of their African American students were struggling. One noted that she thought the students were coming to school without the skillset to match “the way we define
success in our society.” Their recognition of the fact that the system itself is a barrier for some students alludes to how school systems have been created to cater to the majority race. The discipline data from each school confirms that White students in these schools are being disciplined at much lower rates than African American students, which relates to the second tenet of CRT.

The second tenet of CRT is that because this system of institutionalized racism advances the interests of Whites, many are not interested in abandoning it. It is also confirmed through the findings of this study, particularly for White students. Although the principals (who were all White) were aware that their systems were disproportionately affecting African American students, only half of them were actively making changes to change their systems. The other three leaders were aware of disproportionate discipline rates and concerned by them, but did not place a high priority on making actionable changes to their system. These three leaders were from the same district, and explained that the priorities of the school district were more focused on the academic achievement of the students than any other aspect. This leads to the conclusion that because the White students were not being overly affected by the discipline rates, that the issue had not risen to the level of becoming either a school or district priority. The other finding in this study that relates here is that in all five of the schools, White students were significantly underrepresented in both discipline infractions and actions when compared to the portion of the population they comprise. This reinforces the tenet that the systems in place at these schools are advancing the interest of Whites, because the discipline systems appear to be working for White students. Smaller numbers of White students are being referred for discipline infractions and receiving discipline actions than the African American students, which likely leads to more time in class, more instruction, and higher achievement for White students.
The third tenet of CRT, that race is a social construction, is also reinforced in the findings of this work. According to Simson (2014), opportunities for bias occur when teachers and administrators use their socially constructed views of race to make decisions related to student disciplinary actions. The teaching and administrative staff in each of the schools in this study were overwhelmingly comprised of White females. Among the teaching staff in all five schools, only eight African American teachers were currently employed, out of approximately two hundred certified teachers. Principals noted in interviews that their teachers were mostly “White, middle class women” and were quick to point out that their teachers were unaware of what life was like for the students from different races and economic backgrounds than their own. The administrators interviewed were also all White females, with one male principal. When examining the demographics in light of Simson’s work, it follows that the patterns of decisions being made in light of each player’s socially constructed view of race could be the root cause of disproportionate discipline rates in these schools. It is interesting to note here that in the school with the smallest rate of disproportionate discipline for African American students, the principal was highly aware of the African American culture and saw her role as the gatekeeper for ensuring that these students were not being singled out or punished at higher rates than other students. This suggests that her social construction of race for African American students differs from the administrators at the other schools, likely due to her extensive work in schools with a majority of African American students.

The final tenet of CRT, that groups are racialized differently throughout history, usually in response to the labor market, also comes into play in light of these findings. Because the demographics of the teachers are so different from the African American students in these schools and principals noted the presence of cultural mismatch, teachers and administrators may
perceive the actions of African American students differently. When a misunderstanding occurs due to limited cultural knowledge of the other race, conflict often occurs. If the teachers perceive their students as threatening, aggressive, or dangerous then they are more likely to push these students out for discipline reasons, leading to administrators taking discipline action against them. In light of the research findings in this study that African American students are being disciplined at higher rates in these schools than White students and that principals believe the primary factor is a cultural mismatch, implicit bias is implicated. Recent studies have confirmed the presence of implicit bias in schools and its role in disparate rates of discipline for African American students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019).

**Implicit Bias**

According to McIntosh et. al (2014), the more ambiguous a decision is, the more opportunities for implicit bias. In finding the unclear and non-developed discipline systems in place in these schools, there are multiple chances for implicit bias to impact the discipline decisions made. The composition of subjective discipline offenses was much higher for African American students than they were for White students, which suggests implicit bias is present at the classroom level when teachers make the decision to refer students to the office. This finding is consistent with the work of Skiba et al (2002), who found that African Americans were more likely to be referred to the office for offenses that were more subjective in nature, such as disrespect, threats, and excessive noise, while White students were more likely to be referred for more objective offenses, such as smoking, vandalism, and obscene language. In four of these schools, African American students were overrepresented at high rates for Insubordination and Disorderly Conduct, with composition differences ranging from 24% to 37% for Insubordination and 23% to 37% for Disorderly Conduct. White students were underrepresented in both
categories at high rates as well. Both types of offenses were broadly defined by principals including a wide range of behaviors, from actively defying what the teacher told them to do to throwing chairs and causing a substantial disruption to class. Some even noted that these categories were a “catch-all” for behaviors of students and that there were differences based on who the referring teacher was.

One school (Middle C), however, had composition differences in these categories for African American students that were minimal (-1% for Insubordination and 0 for Disorderly Conduct), with White students overrepresented in these categories at much lower rates than the other schools (9% for Insubordination and 8% for Disorderly Conduct.) This outlier could be due to several causes, including having a principal who has developed deep knowledge of African American culture and student behaviors, a different social construction of race for African American students, and a focus on building caring relationships with African American students. She also conveyed that she doesn’t allow her teachers to handle students inappropriately, and that she is able to get to the root of what is wrong with a student fairly quickly because of the relationships she has built with them. In telling the story of an African American student who was about to be expelled from the alternative school for behavior, she told of how she had devised a plan to have him come back to her campus and stay in the ISS room to finish out the year so he would not have to redo the entire grade. She said,

And I told him, baby, I'm working on let you have a real schedule, play football, whatever you want to do. Academically, he was an A/B student, but he just has a temper... he's gone to residential two or three times and they just couldn't...So we're trying, we're going to be really try. But I know some people probably would criticize and say that was a weakness on my part. I just didn't want to expel him... I just felt like that wasn't what was best. And I've had a lot of African American parents come to see me about that and just tell me that's why they are happy their child's here, that I can see beyond, you know, his anger and see the potential in them. And I'm hoping that he's going to make it.
Her compassion for this student and willingness to see beyond his behavior has built trust with not just his family, but others in the community as well. It is clear that the role of the principal can have a significant impact on combatting implicit bias in schools when they are aware and understand the cultures of their students (DeMatthews, 2016; Warren et al., 2009).

**Administrative and Teacher Training**

Administrator and teacher training is also implicated in the findings of this study. Two of the schools were engaged in work with Solution Tree, a nationally-known professional development provider for schools that focuses on implementation of professional learning communities (PLC). Through their work, Solution Tree coaches were working directly with the administrators and teachers to help them focus on their most immediate areas of need. Both schools were engaged in creating structures in their schools for teachers to collaborate with one another to increase student learning. However, in one school the work was more focused on academic needs (Middle B), although the principal mentioned that they were going to be more focused on the other needs of students, including behavior interventions, in the 2019-2020 school year. The other school (Elementary A), was specifically focused on creating more equitable opportunities in their school based on the results of an audit conducted by Solution Tree. Middle B is one of ten schools that was selected to be in the first cohort of a statewide grant for schools to implement PLC processes over a three-year period. They received this support free of charge, while Elementary A contracted on their own for one year to receive coaching services from Solution Tree. Elementary A has since been selected to be part of the third cohort of the PLC statewide grant and will receive three years of free coaching.

The work of Solution Tree in both schools speaks to the impact an outside professional development provider can have in rural schools, especially when they are geographically
isolated. It was apparent through the interviews with both principals that their teachers were engaged in meaningful, job-embedded professional development through a long-term relationship with the provider. The discipline data in this study is from the 2017-2018 school year, which is prior to either school working with Solution Tree and therefore cannot be used to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of this work on student achievement in each school. However, the data collected from the principals through interviews suggests that these schools are engaged in the work of implementing systems of collaboration and data analysis that can be used to help them address issues of inequity regarding student discipline.

Another type of training that two of the schools were engaged in involves implementation of a PBIS system. Both Elementary and Middle C were part of a grant from Arkansas State University to implement the system in their district. They had just begun the work to implement and had been working with teachers to create a matrix of positive behavior expectations and lesson plans for each teacher to use to teach them to all students. Through the grant they were allowed to take a team of teachers from each school to Little Rock for a series of trainings to learn the importance and methods of utilizing positive behavior interventions with students. Although the training was not on-site as Solution Tree is, it was clear through interviews that both principals believed in the approach and were excited about the work that was going on in their schools. Both also spoke of making the shift from only the administrators monitoring discipline data to having a lead team of teachers who were responsible for regular monitoring. As part of this work they also were working to develop a discipline referral form that required information such as the location and time of day of the discipline incident, to better track areas of concern for students. McKintosh et. al (2014) found that when principals work to make their discipline systems as objective as possible, operationalize staff expectations, and provide training
in how to respond instructionally to student behavior, it can have a positive impact on discipline referral rates. The use of positive behavior and support systems, such as those implemented in PBIS, have been shown to be so effective that the US Commission on Civil Rights recommended the Department of Justice provide guidance for all schools in the nation on its implementation (July 2019). Recent studies have shown that implementing Culturally Responsive PBIS (CRPBIS) can have an even greater effect on reducing disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students, which may be more appropriate for this district based on the results of this study (Johnson et al., 2018). Although these systems are being implemented for the 2019-2020 school year and did not impact the discipline data in this study, it appears that these two schools are committed to implementing an effective system to improve discipline outcomes for all students.

A final type of administrator training that is implicated in this study is the work of the Arkansas Leadership Academy’s (ALA) Master Principal Program. The Master Principal Program is a selection-based program created in 2003 by the Arkansas legislature to “provide training programs and opportunities to expand the knowledge base and leadership skills of public school principals.” The three-year program equips principals with the skills to achieve “designation”, which is a rigorous review process documenting the principal’s effect on raising student achievement in their school. The state provides annual financial bonuses to Master Principals who achieve this designation and extra incentive for those serving as principals in “high need” schools.

The principal of Elementary A had been involved in this training for three years at the time of the interview and there were marked positive differences both in her level of skill in distributed leadership and in the focused and intentional work going on in her school when
compared to the others that can be contributed to her training at ALA. The comprehensive nature of the professional development being provided to her teachers speaks to her skill in understanding that the most effective training for teachers is job-embedded, delivered on an on-going basis over a long period of time, and allows opportunities for practice and feedback. (Joyce & Showers, 2002). The focus of her work began through a needs assessment utilizing various sources of data in her school, including discipline data, attendance data, and the academic performance of students. She led her team through analyzing the data and deciding on a specific area of focus for them to work on as a school using the tools learned in ALA. They chose to focus collectively on decreasing the discipline referral rate for all students, including those with recurring infractions. In addition to involving the staff in each aspect of planning for how to address the area they chose to focus on, she planned a series of varied and differentiated learning experiences to address the issue from multiple perspectives including using student data to dig deeper into the backgrounds of students with recurring infractions, empathy-training for teachers, creating an awareness of culturally-responsive teaching strategies, allowing teams of teachers to attend intensive behavior training at the regional cooperative for students needing extra support, conducting a book study on culturally-responsive techniques, and utilizing the practice of instructional rounds to for teachers to observe other teachers using the strategies. This type of comprehensive planning for professional development, use of data to guide decisions, and distribution of leadership is the focus of ALA’s work with principals in crafting systems that lead to high student achievement. It was apparent that this principal was able to utilize Solution Tree to enhance her work, but knew how to address this because of her work with ALA’s Master Principal program. She referred to her work with ALA throughout both interviews as the impetus that empowered her to embark on this work and what equipped her with the strategies and skills
needed to sustain it and take it to scale. This finding is consistent with the work of Peer (2012), who conducted a qualitative study of designated Master Principals trained by ALA and found that they showed significant improvement in leadership skills, knowledge, and successfully shifted their school culture toward one of collaboration and distributed leadership.

It is clear that the role of administrator and teacher training is imperative in helping to move schools forward in addressing equity for all students. In four of the five the schools in this study, the presence of outside professional development support, through grants and their own funding, was a necessary component of helping them to move forward. In the one school that was not involved with any outside professional development other than a one-time, all-day session for the entire district on poverty at the beginning of the school year, the principal readily admitted that she didn’t have the knowledge and skills to know how to address the issue of disproportionate discipline for students. Continuing to provide this type of support to schools and districts, especially in rural areas, through state funding and grants is a critical component in helping school leaders and their staff understand and implement processes to better meet the needs of all students.

**Discipline Policies and Practices**

The discipline policies and practices in place in the schools studied are a final important piece in the picture of disproportionate discipline for students. Although all schools receive the same federal and state guidance with regard to discipline policies, the way they are interpreted on the local level differs. All principals pointed out that the policies were necessary to “back them up” when they made tough discipline decisions, but they also mentioned that they were careful to make their policies in the handbook vague enough so that they didn’t “tie their hands” when it came to dealing with discipline. All of the schools mentioned having zero tolerance policies for
the most serious offenses, which in their opinion included drugs, alcohol, and weapons. One of the schools had expelled a student during the 2017-2018 school year for bring a loaded gun to campus with the intent to kill another student. This child was in preschool and four years old, but the principal was clear that her first responsibility was to ensure the safety of all children in her care, regardless of the age of the offender. When specifically asked about zero tolerance policies, the principals were all in agreement that they were to be used only for the most severe situations and they often had much better results when they focused on getting to the cause of the discipline problem rather than just punishing the student for it. The principals of the lower elementary schools felt that there might be more of a place for zero tolerance policies with older students, but said they rarely used them. All said that zero tolerance policies were ineffective and created more harmful experiences for the students, but that they would use them for the most serious offenses.

The practices being used in these schools, although aligned to policies, were more inconsistent. Each principal discussed and told stories to illustrate the nature of dealing with student discipline, and it is clear that there are multiple factors that come into play before a decision can be made. Although policies provided some guidance as to consequences for discipline incidents, most preferred to use a progressive form of discipline that became increasingly more severe with repeated incidents. All schools were in the practice of using ISS as consequence for students with repeated behavior problems, even for students as young as kindergarten. In all five of the schools, African American students received ISS as a consequence at disproportionately higher rates given their composition of the population, while White students were underrepresented. Corporal punishment was mentioned by principals as being used sparingly, based on parent request. The composition differences for corporal punishment for
African American and White students were smaller than they were for ISS, which may be due to African American parents choosing to opt out of corporal punishment for their children. If this is the case, then principals said that ISS was their other option. This use of parent request as a parameter for the administration of corporal punishment may be a reason why the numbers are higher for African American students for ISS. Out-of-school suspension was seen as a last resort for the most serious offenses, and the elementary campuses used it little, if at all. This may be due to legislation banning the use of OSS for students in grades K-5 except under the most serious of circumstances. Expulsion was only used once out of all five schools, for the preschool student with the loaded handgun. It was not seen as a viable option for students at any level by the principals, because of the loss of credit and adverse effect it had on students.

The impact of discipline policies and practices in schools can have an effect on disproportionate rates, when utilized consistently. It is clear that at the federal level with the implementation of ESSA that schools are encouraged to look closely at equity with regard to student discipline, and state legislation is increasingly more concerned with that as well. At the conclusion of the 2019 legislative session, several new laws had been passed that impact student discipline, including one banning the use of corporal punishment on students with disabilities (Act 557 of 2019). Principals discussed the impact of this new law and how it was leading them to ban the use of corporal punishment for all students, in at least two of the schools in the study.

Discipline policies are helpful in that they set the guidelines for what can and can’t be done in schools, but it is really the everyday practices that have the most impact on reducing disproportionality when used consistently. The implementation of discipline systems with clear expectations for students and staff, a system for monitoring student discipline data on an ongoing basis, and supports for students to learn the expected behaviors instead of just being
punished for misbehavior can have a significant impact. Implementing these systems is the work that principals can and should foster in their schools to ensure equity for all students.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

There are several limitations to this study, including the sensitive nature of the phenomenon studied and changes that have occurred related to school discipline at the federal, state, and local levels during the course of the study. Because the focus of this study involved race and implicit bias, participants may have withheld their true beliefs on the topic. Their positions as administrators in small schools within a single region in the state could possibly lead to repercussions in the media and their communities if their true beliefs could be construed as “racist” by others. Therefore, this limitation means that the data collected in the qualitative portion of the study may not reflect the administrators’ true beliefs. Another limitation is the policy changes that took place during the course of the study at various levels. Guidance from the federal level requiring schools to examine their discipline data for disparate impact was revoked during the course of the study, causing some confusion for schools as to where they should focus their efforts. State and local guidance on student discipline also developed during the study as a result of ongoing implementation of the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) related to school discipline means that the data collected may not reflect the current state of these schools. Data collected for the 2017-2018 school year in the study reflects actions under previous state and local guidelines and current discipline data may show different rates of disproportionate discipline under the new guidelines. This also includes the implementation of Act 557 of 2019, a new state law prohibiting corporal punishment for students with disabilities which went into effect at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. This new
law may impact disproportionate rates of discipline because all five schools in the study were using corporal punishment as a discipline option for all students at the time it was conducted.

Delimitations include the sample of principals that were interviewed and schools selected for the study, as well as a lack of students with recurring infraction data available at the student level for each school. The principals that were included in the study all had personal relationships with the researcher and were selected through convenience sampling. This decision was made due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the likelihood that they would feel comfortable sharing their true beliefs about disproportionate rates of discipline in their school. However, the sample could have been expanded to other principals in the region to determine if the same patterns of disproportionate discipline were occurring in their schools. The schools included in the study were all located within one region of the state, and therefore results are not generalizable to all rural schools in the state. The schools were selected in this region because of the rural nature of the area and the researcher’s previous role as a principal in the region. The final delimitation is the lack of chronic offender data at the student level which could further explain the extent of disproportionate discipline in these schools. Because of the current data reporting system in use in Arkansas for schools, only total numbers of infractions and actions by each demographic were available to the researcher. Being able to get the infraction and action data by student would help to account for any skewing of the data because of students with recurring infractions and offer a more realistic picture of discipline disproportionate rates in each school. However, the decision was made to include each principal’s perception of how representative their rates of disproportionality were based on their experience even though exact numbers were unable to be determined.
Implications for Professional Practice

The work of creating equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students is a goal of every school. However, many school leaders are currently working in schools with disproportionate rates of student discipline for African American students but may not know, as the leaders in this study expressed, what specific actions they can take to reduce those rates. There are several areas of implication for current practitioners, including processes to implement and implications for graduate education leadership preparation training.

Primary Actions for Professional Practice

The processes necessary for taking action with regard to disproportionate discipline rates include having a system for discipline referrals that is clear and objective and minimizes opportunities for subjective decisions to be made. Time should be taken to involve the teachers in the creation of a discipline system that operationalizes the expectations for all students, clearly defines behaviors that are to be handled in the classroom and those to be managed by the office, and gives examples. These systems should be written down and readily available to staff, parents, and students to increase consistency and transparency. A clear process for when and how to refer a student to the office should also be included. As part of the discipline system, a system for regularly monitoring student discipline data for disparate effect on groups of students, including African American students, should also be in place. Training in how to examine data for disparate impact should be provided for staff members if needed, and is readily available from a variety of sources, including the PBIS data manual (McIntosh, Barnes, Eliason & Morris, 2014).

In addition, principals can provide training for their staff in several areas to decrease disproportionate rates of discipline and increase equitable opportunities for all students. Training
in awareness of implicit bias and empathy has been proven to be effective in reducing bias in decisions (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018). Use of the Implicit Association Test is one way to help teachers understand their own implicit biases and then work can begin on how to reduce their impact in decisions. See Appendix E for more information on the Implicit Association Test. Just being aware that you have certain biases against groups can be an effective way to reduce their impact. Training and awareness in culturally-responsive practices for teachers and administrators should also be included, specifically related to the student and family groups within the school. With regard to discipline, culturally-responsive classroom management techniques should be included in the training, as well as relationship-building with students and families in culturally-responsive ways.

**Graduate Educational Leadership Preparation Programs**

The findings in this study also provide implications for principal preparation and training programs. As part of their preparation, principals need more specific training in what disparate impact is and how it can have negative long-term effects on students. In addition to understanding what it is, programs should include practical training in how to calculate discipline rates for each student group to determine if disproportionate rates are occurring in their school. They also need a deep understanding of implicit bias and how it can impact students in schools, as well as how to create systems that minimize its impact. Although principal preparation programs typically contain a component of culturally-responsive training, it needs to go much further than a cursory course on diversity or multiculturalism. These courses should include the different aspects of culturally-responsive pedagogy, including classroom management, curriculum and materials, engagement strategies, relationship-building, and the importance of rigor. According to DeMatthews (2016), the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders
(PSEL) provide some guidance for addressing equity issues with future principals, but fall short in advocating leadership for social justice. By learning about the different aspects of cultural responsiveness, principals will be in a better position to address the needs of their school.

**Data Systems and Training in Schools**

The work of this study also implicates work that can be done to reduce inequity in the data systems in place in rural schools. All of the schools in this study relied on the free, state-provided data system as their primary source to track discipline incidents and actions. This is likely due to the cost of purchasing data systems that break down information and show areas of disproportionate discipline that many larger districts purchase. One such system, Smart Data by White River Solutions, is an automated data dashboard and early warning system for school districts that many larger districts in the state have already purchased. This system allows school personnel to easily examine and analyze discipline data, provides areas of disproportionate discipline, and supports the work of Response to Intervention (RtI) and PBIS teams. The system pulls from the state reporting system, but breaks the data down into a format that is easy to access and understand. In fact, the system is so well-designed that the Arkansas Department of Education’s Research and Technology team is promoting its use purporting that it is a better solution for tracking data than anything provided by the state. However, the system comes at a cost of $10 per student, per year. Rural schools that are struggling with finances find it difficult to purchase these systems, resulting in inequitable outcomes for students in their schools. When the funds are not available to purchase these systems, the principals are left to create their own data-monitoring systems, which often looks different from school-to-school. To mediate this issue, professional development for principals can be provided to help them understand how to break down their data into a meaningful format for easy use by teams. Online professional
development modules provided at low or no-cost could help to support this work as well. Another solution would be for the state to negotiate with Smart Data or a similar service and provide free access to the dashboard for all schools to reduce inequities in data availability and use in rural schools across the state.

**Implications for Future Research**

Although much research has been conducted around disproportionate discipline in schools, this study opens up areas of further research within the field with regard to principal impact, rural schools, and cultural responsiveness. To more completely understand the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline for students in rural schools, this study should be replicated in other contexts. These schools were located in one geographic region of the state, but replication could include other regions of the state or rural districts in other states across the nation. Replication could help to establish patterns of impact that principals can have on disparate impact and also measure effects of systems put into place to address it.

To expand the work of this study, focus groups of teachers, parents, and students could be conducted to add their voices to the research. Teachers in these schools or other rural schools with established disproportionate rates of discipline should be included, and both African American and White students should be included for their perceptions. Another expansion of this study would be to revisit these schools using their discipline data from the 2019-2020 school year to determine if changes have occurred in disproportionate rates. Because the principals spoke of systems they were currently implementing and some were focused on reducing those rates, it would be interesting to measure the type of impact realized after implementation and to determine if participation in this study had an impact on their practice.
This study showed a relationship between the level of cultural-responsiveness of the principal and their rate of disproportionate discipline for African American and White students. Future research could consider comparing the school culture in schools where culturally-responsive professional development has occurred as compared to those who have not engaged in any work around culture. A final implication would be to compare the responses of principals from urban schools with disproportionate rates of discipline to those of the principals in rural schools to determine if there is a difference based on context.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline for African American students compared to White students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. The concern was that African American students were being disciplined at much higher rates than their White counterparts in rural schools, even though they comprised a smaller portion of the student population. Existing research has shown that African American students in Arkansas receive 117.6 discipline referrals per 100 students, whereas White and Other race students receive 37 – 40 per 100 students (Anderson, 2018). Research seems to indicate that students receiving higher rates of exclusionary discipline are at heightened risk of lower student achievement, dropping out, and ultimately prison (Alexander, 2012.) This study reveals that principals, though aware of the disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students in their schools, are unsure of the best ways to reduce this phenomenon. The findings appear to indicate that principals who are culturally aware of the student diversity in their respective schools and take specific, concrete actions to ensure equity for all students, are most successful in reducing rates of disproportionate discipline. This study also shows a need for clear, objective discipline systems in schools that minimize the impact of
implicit bias. Until all educators understand the impact of implicit bias in schools, the role we all play in ensuring equitable outcomes for students, and how best to ensure equity for all, there is work to be done.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Interview 1

Research Questions:

1. How is discipline disproportionality perceived in a specific rural school setting from the building-level administrator’s perspective?

2. From a building-level administrator’s perspective, what factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality in a rural school setting?

● Tell me about your experience as a school administrator.
  - Years in this school
  - Educational background – preparation to be an admin.
  - Are you from this community? Live in the community? How long have you been a part of it?
  - Why did you decide to become an administrator?

● Tell me about your community.
  - Would you classify it as rural? If so, what makes it rural?
  - How do you think being a rural community impacts your school?
  - What are the most positive aspects of your community?
  - What challenges does your community face?
  - What makes your community unique from other communities in this region?
  - How would you describe how your community perceives education?
  - Does your community support your school?

● Tell me about your school.
• Demographics of staff and students
• Do the demographics of your school match those of the community? If not, why?
• How well does the makeup of your staff represent the demographics of your student body? Do you believe this has an effect on your school?
• Free/reduced lunch rate
• What cultures are represented among students and staff?
• Describe any patterns you see with different culture groups.
• In what ways do you honor differences among cultures in your school?

• What is your school’s approach to student discipline?
  • Goals?
  • Who is responsible for discipline in your school?
  • Describe your discipline system and consequences. Which consequences do you give most often?
  • How do you think the staff perceives discipline?
  • Do you think that your school’s classification as rural impacts student discipline? If so, how?
  • Reconstruct a discipline issue that stands out in your mind. Detail how you handled it, from start to finish.
  • Do you do anything differently for students with recurring infractions?
  • How do you involve parents in student discipline?
  • Are there mandated consequences for discipline actions? If so, what are they?
  • Who created your system? What is it based on?
  • What is your opinion on zero tolerance policies for student discipline?
• How rigid is the system? Do you have leeway to make adjustments to consequences when necessary?

• Have you had any training, PD, or done any research in setting up systems that are equitable for all students? Culturally responsive methods? How culturally responsive do you believe your system is?

• How closely do you follow the discipline policies and/or system in place on a daily basis?

• If you deviate from the system, what drives that decision?

• How consistent do you believe you are in following the system?

• How accurate do you think your discipline rates are reported?

• Knowing that your goals for discipline are………how well do you think your school is achieving them?

  • How do you know?

  • What do you think contributes to success? Failure?

  • Do you believe that your system is equitable for all students? How do you know?

  • Do you believe that any race is receiving consequences at a higher rate than another in your school? If you had to guess, what is the rate? What do you think causes that difference?

  • Do you believe that your local policies and practices are equitable for all students? How do you know?

  • Do you have a copy of your discipline policies that I could have?
Interview 2

Research Questions:

1. How is discipline disproportionality perceived in a specific rural school setting from the building-level administrator’s perspective?

2. From a building-level administrator’s perspective, what factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality in a rural school setting?

- Review informed consent and gain agreement verbally.

- I shared with you the transcript from your first interview. Is there anything in there you want to clarify or provide more information on? Remind if there is, they can always contact me.

- Discuss discipline data from 17/18.
  - Pulled from ADE reports.
  - Restricted values – had to calculate based on difference and evenly divide among categories. Not exact numbers for most, but close.

- Infractions:
  - Who determines the code for an infraction?
  - What do you classify as Insubordination? Can you give me an example?
  - What do you consider Disorderly Conduct? Example?
  - What do you consider a fight? Example?
  - What is included in the Other category? Example?

- Actions: What does the Other category mean?
- Do parents have an option to refuse certain types of discipline action such as CP? If so, what is their other option?

- Data (Specific questions were tailored to each school’s data. These questions were used for Middle B’s principal based on his data).
  - I noticed there is a 7% difference between B population and infractions. Does that surprise you? Any thoughts on the cause?
  - There is a -5% difference between W population and infractions. What do you think is causing that difference?
  - When looking across the table at infractions, the numbers for each type of infraction are almost proportionate when compared to the percentage of the population they represent. What do you think explains this?
  - The percentage of Black students for fighting and bullying is somewhat higher than for insubordination and disorderly conduct. Thoughts?
  - It looks like ISS is used most frequently for discipline action. Can you explain why ISS is used often?

- Now let’s talk about students with recurring infractions.
  - How do you define a chronic offender? How many referrals before you consider them one?
  - How do you track students with recurring infractions? How quickly are you aware that they’ve reached a certain number of referrals? Is there a report that you pull from your data to help?
  - What impact do you believe students with recurring infractions have on this data set?
**Big picture**

- After looking at this data, what are your thoughts on discipline and disproportionality?
- How do you define disproportionality in discipline?
- What do you believe are the biggest factors causing disproportionality in your school?
- How do you think these factors differ in rural schools vs. urban? Or do they?
- What actions will you take as a result of analyzing your data?
- Your school’s data is most definitely an outlier in my data set. Of the five schools studied, yours is the only one where the percentage of Black students being referred and receiving discipline actions was lower than the percentage of white students, regardless of the population. Why do you think this is?
## Appendix B: Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Support</td>
<td>Responses related to how the community provides support to the schools, or how the school gives back in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of Rural</td>
<td>Features of the participants’ rural communities that they believe contribute to their designation as rural.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Tension</td>
<td>Responses that indicate conflict in school and community among races.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEMOGRAPHICS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Responses reflect how poverty impacts their school and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Demographics</td>
<td>Descriptions of staff demographics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Demographics</td>
<td>Descriptions of student demographics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EQUITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Responses that reflect issues of equity related to student discipline in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IMPACT OF STUDY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of study</td>
<td>Responses that reflect changes because of participation in the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXTERNAL SUPPORT</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Court</td>
<td>Responses that describe court involvement and how they view their support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Responses that describe how they utilize outside mental health providers to support students with discipline issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Responses that describe how schools utilize outside support for professional development of teachers and leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Apathy</td>
<td>Responses that describe parent involvement that principals perceive as being apathetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Barrier</td>
<td>Responses that describe things that get in the way of true parent support of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support</td>
<td>Responses that describe how parents provide support to the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRINCIPAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Aware of Disproportionality</td>
<td>Responses describe disproportionalities principals are aware of related to their schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Culturally Aware</td>
<td>Responses describe cultural differences between racial groups from the principal's perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Barrier</td>
<td>Responses describe principal barriers to equitable outcomes for all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Path to Administration</td>
<td>Responses describe how they came to be administrators in their district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action: Creating Culture</td>
<td>Responses describe actions taken by the principal to intentionally create a culture in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action: Designing Interventions</td>
<td>Responses describe actions taken by the principal to design interventions to support students in discipline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action: Hiring Practices</td>
<td>Responses describe actions taken by the principal to recruit Black teachers for their school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action: Passive</td>
<td>Responses describe actions that could be taken to address issues of equity, but they haven't been or should be done by someone else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action: Professional Development</td>
<td>Responses describe actions taken by the principal to implement professional development for their teachers related to student discipline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action: Redesigning System</td>
<td>Responses describe actions taken by the principal to redesign the discipline system for greater effectiveness and equity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RELATIONSHIPS**

| Relationships with Families         | Responses describe ways the school builds relationships with families of students.                                                         |
| Relationships with Staff            | Responses describe ways the principal builds relationships with staff members.                                                            |
| Relationships with Students         | Responses describe ways that principals build relationships with students.                                                                 |

**SCHOOLWIDE DISCIPLINE SYSTEM (SWDS)**

| SWDS: Students with Recurring Infractions | Responses describe what constitutes a chronic offender and how they handle them.                                                          |
| SWDS: Discipline Actions              | Responses describe discipline actions that principals routinely use for student infractions.                                               |
| SWDS: Discipline Data                  | Responses describe types of discipline data principals use and their awareness of actual rates.                                           |
**SWDS: Discipline Policy**  
Responses describe principals’ thoughts on policy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SWDS: Zero Tolerance Policy</strong></td>
<td>Responses describe principals’ views on the use of zero tolerance policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SWDS: Discipline Reporting</strong></td>
<td>Responses describe administrators’ perceptions about discipline reporting in their school and how they code infractions and actions. Responses include stories of discipline principals told throughout interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SWDS: Discipline Story</strong></td>
<td>Responses include principals' perspectives on PBIS as a schoolwide discipline system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)**

**Social Emotional Learning**  
Responses include thoughts on SEL.

**TEACHER**

**Teacher Barrier**  
Responses focus on teacher barriers principals notice preventing equitable discipline for all students.

**Teacher Ownership**  
Responses focus on how teachers are leading the way with supporting equitable discipline.
Appendix C: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT

*Title:* Disproportionality in Discipline of African American Students in Rural Schools in Arkansas

*Researcher:* Julie Workman  
Kevin P. Brady, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor  
University of Arkansas, College of Education  
Graduate Education Building  
751 W Maple St, Fayetteville, AR 72701  
(479) 575-3208  
jeworkma@uark.edu

*Compliance Contact:* Ro Windwalker, CIP  
Research Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
109 MLKG Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
479-575-2208  
irb@uark.edu

*Description:* The present study is a mixed methods study designed to investigate the phenomenon of disproportionate rates of discipline for African American students in rural schools in Southeast Arkansas. Student discipline data for the 2017-2018 school year will be analyzed to determine the total number of discipline referrals and discipline actions that occurred in each school for white and African American students. School administrators from each school will then be interviewed to share their perceptions on student discipline and disproportionality in their school from the perspective of a rural school administrator.

*Risks and Benefits:* The risks associated with the study include the possibility that information shared in interviews could be potentially embarrassing to participants given their position as leaders in their school. The benefits of participation include the sharing of ideas and gaining a better understanding of student discipline in their own school through the interviewing process.

*Voluntary Participation:* All participants have the option of choosing not to participate in the study.

*Interview Information:* Each interview will take place at a location of the participant’s choosing and will take approximately one hour. All interviews will be audio recorded.

*Confidentiality:* All information shared in interviews will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. To ensure confidentiality, anonymous names for each school and administrator (Elementary A, Middle School B, Principal A, Principal B) will be assigned to all data collected. Discipline data for each school will be stored using the anonymous school name assigned. All data will be stored in a secure location and will be

accessible only to the researcher. Neither the school, district, nor the administrator will be personally identified.

Right to Withdraw: If you choose to participate in the interview, but at any time and for any reason change your mind, you may withdraw your consent. In that case your data and that of the school would not be included in the study. There would be no negative consequences for this decision.

Informed Consent: I __________________________ have read the description of this study. I understand the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, the potential risks and benefits, how confidentiality will be established and maintained, as well as the option to withdraw.

My signature below indicates that I freely agree to be recorded and analyzed as a participant in this project.

________________________________________  ________________
Participant                                      Date

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

To: Julie Elizabeth Workman
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee
Date: 04/24/2019
Action: Expedited Approval
Action Date: 04/24/2019
Protocol #: 1903181179
Study Title: Disproportionality in Discipline of African American Students in Rural Schools in Arkansas
Expiration Date: 03/20/2020
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kevin P Brady, Investigator
Appendix E: Implicit Association Test

The Implicit Association Test is a measure of the strength of associations between concepts and evaluations or stereotypes. The test is available online for free and is the most widely used instrument for implicit bias in education today (Gullo et al., 2019). In the test, users are shown stimuli and asked to categorize each based on categories on either the left or right-side of the screen by clicking either the “e” or “i” key. There are five tasks within the test, including the following: word sort, image sort, combined image and word sort, reversed image sort, and reversed combined image and word sort. The reversal of the order of concepts for the final two tasks reduces the effect of practice on results (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

Bias is measured by the response times for how quickly associations are formed. For example, if the concept is ladybugs versus spiders, and the user is quicker to associate ladybugs (than spiders) with positive words like “pleasant” or “good” and slower to associate them with negative words, then this would reveal a pro-ladybug bias. If the ladybugs and spiders are replaced instead with words like “black” and “white” and the images are of black and white faces, the test can be used to determine a user’s preferences for race. A key assumption made for the test is that users prefer the concepts they associate with positive words. Because of the availability of the test and its wide use, its consistency and accuracy is well-established. The test is available for free at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html.