REIMAGINING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: A WHITE, FEMALE PRINCIPAL'S EXPERIENCE IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES ANS SW-PBIS

by

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ABSTRACT

TRISHA SMITH COOK. Reimagining School Discipline: A White, Female Principal's Experience Implementing Restorative Practices and SW-PBIS.
(Under the direction of DR. BETTIE RAY BUTLER)

Educators and researchers have been exploring alternative approaches to school discipline such as School-wide Positive Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS) and Restorative Justice. While these programs and practices along have been determined to be effective in reducing instances of discipline disproportionality (McIntosh et. al., 2018; Stewart Kline, 2016), there has been little research analyzing the effectiveness of both approaches implemented in tandem. Using an autoethnographic design, this study critically analyzes the beliefs and perceptions of one white, female school principal as she combines SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices at her racially diverse, Title I elementary school. Through the collection of raw data, reflexive journaling, and reflecting on public, archival data sets, the researcher explored the essence of her own identity as a white, female principal by addressing the following research questions: 1) How has implementing restorative practices and SW-PBIS simultaneously within a diverse, Title I, urban-like school helped to shape my beliefs as a white female administrator? 2) As a white female principal, what are my perceptions of the staff response to a blended model of SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices? 3) How do I, as a white female principal, contribute to the environment that produces discipline disparities? How do I combat it? Four themes emerged during the data analysis: A Pollyanna Principal, Deficit Mindsets, Zero Tolerance for Zero-Tolerance, and White Savior. The findings revealed connections between the themes and Critical Race Theory, exposing the influence of race in student discipline through her eyes as a white female principal. Realizing the influence and

impact of her whiteness on school discipline was a humbling epiphany.
Recommendations for future research include studies that incorporate the voices of Black students and their families and focus on shifting mindsets. Additionally, recommendations are provided for teachers, student teachers, administrators, and parents when looking to tear down the walls of discipline disproportionality.

DEDICATION

My study is an autoethnography and I would not be the person that I am today without the significant influence and support of my family members. Therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Pat Smith, who is no longer with us. She taught me to love unconditionally, embrace differences, and strive to right the wrongs of the world. To my father, Don Smith, who never wavered in his support and taught me the value of knowledge, pushing myself to attain my goals, and to always leave a place better than when you found it. To my husband, Chris Cook, who has been my biggest cheerleader throughout my doctoral journey. To my children, Nate Scardina and Caroline Cook, you both inspire me to be a better person every day. To my sister, Heather Gambrell, you brought the laughter when I need it most. I love you all. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2008, legislation was passed in North Carolina that allowed for families to "opt out" of their home schools if they were deemed "failing". School districts were taxed with the responsibility of designating other school options and providing the transportation to get there. Our school district designated the school where I was an assistant principal as one to where families could select to attend instead of remaining at their home school. Approximately forty to fifty students from a neighboring school opted to attend our school and the majority of these students were students of color. Our school population was predominately white, including staff and students, and as a small, neighborhood school, it became evident that change was quite hard.

Staff began to struggle with classroom management because they were not prepared to work with students from diverse backgrounds and adverse situations. They relied heavily on the traditional approaches to school discipline such as punishments that took away privileges or removed students from the classroom. Staff morale decreased because of the frustration they felt when they were not successful in changing student behaviors using these approaches.

The total school enrollment hovered around 400 students and the numbers of office referrals soared, increasing from 194 in the school year 2007 – 2008 to 252 in the school year 2009 – 2010. It also became clear that our students of color were being disproportionately referred to the office for subjective offenses such as disrespect, defiance, and disruption. Explicit definitions and communication of the behavioral expectations were nonexistent, and the lack thereof exacerbated the situations, especially for those that were subjective in nature (disrespect, defiance, disruption). For example,

we stated we wanted students to be respectful but that actually looked like varied from staff member to staff member. One student may refuse to take his hoodie off his head and another may roll her eyes. Sometimes those students received an office referral while others did not. Rather than teaching appropriate behaviors, staff often engaged in power struggles which escalated the situations so that a child resorted to “fight or flight” behaviors. Out of frustration, staff and parents would not hold back their opinions and harshly make statements to me such as “That child has no right being here” or “If he can’t behave then he needs to stay home until he can [behave]” or “My child has the right to learn and she [her behavior] is preventing that.” I think it was the statement that a “child had no right to be at our school” that opened my eyes to the implicit biases and exclusive nature that underpinned the culture of the school. This seven-year-old Black student, who was trying to make sense of his new world and school, did not have the right to be at school? I was enraged, appalled, and disappointed. I believe it was this moment that ignited my passion to change school discipline at our school in order to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

In reflecting upon this situation, I thought about what were the underlying reasons that an educator would get to a point to make such a statement. What role did I play in this escalation? Should I have acted more swiftly with punitive consequences so that we did not reach this point? What role did staff members play in this escalation of perceived misbehaviors? The most important question that I pondered was what role did racial bias play in our perceptions and actions? That is a loaded question and one where the answer could uncover an ugly truth. Winn (2018) quoted Kendi, “When you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of

racial discrimination" (p. 36). It was safer for me to say that how we designed our disciplinary system and practices needed to change. As embarrassing as it is to say, as a newer administrator, I took the safer option. Even with the need to address how we structured school discipline, I also knew that our mindset and beliefs about school discipline would have to change.

Students of color across the nation are being suspended and/or expelled at increasingly disproportionate rates as compared to their white counterparts (Haight, Kayama, & Gibson, 2016). The Children's Defense Fund (1975) brought these inequitable outcomes to the forefront of the nation citing that Black students were four times as likely to be suspended for the same school-based offenses as their white peers. Since 1975, the data remain alarmingly similar. According to Smith and Harper (2015), of every K – 12 public school district in the 13 southern states, Black students represented one quarter of the student population. They found in 132 of the southern school districts, "Blacks were disproportionately suspended at rates five-times or higher than their representation in the student population" (p. 3). Additionally, the racial disparities in school discipline between Black and white students are glaringly clear for offenses that are subjective in nature such as disrespect, defiance, and disruption (Keleher, 2000; Losen, 2011; Losen et. al, 2012; Losen et. al, 2015; Smolkowski, et. al., 2016).

The U. S. Department of Justice and the U. S. Department of Education (2014) jointly reported that the increasing use of disciplinary sanctions such as in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, or referrals to law enforcement authorities creates the potential for significant, negative educational and long-term outcomes, and can

contribute to what has been termed the school-to-prison pipeline (U. S. Department of Education, 2014). The school-to-prison pipeline is a term that refers to the path that the traditional exclusionary practices of schools lead students on to higher rates of dropping out of school and incarceration (Owens, 2016; Heitzeg, 2009; Losen, 2015). America's marginalized students are most at risk for being funneled into the juvenile justice system (Nicholson-Crotty et. al., 2009; Welch & Payne, 2012). For example, in the school year 2011 – 2012, out of the 1,508 students in North Carolina who had school-related arrests, only 36.6% of those students were white (Office of Civil Rights, 2012). The unintended consequence of zero-tolerance policies and the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools is having the SRO become involved in minor school-based offenses which have increased the instances of juvenile arrests (Owens, 2016). These data should not be interpreted as Black students are committing these offenses more frequently than white students. On the contrary, the research suggests that white students are not being referred for the same offenses as frequently (Losen, 2015).

In an effort to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, schools across the nation have sought to find alternatives to suspensions and implement practices such as School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (SW-PBIS) and Restorative Justice to support students. SW-PBIS is an evidence-based, tiered system of support that is grounded in data-based decision making. By using student discipline data, educators can objectively determine the need and level of intervention and support for a student and effectively allocate the appropriate resources. The three tiers of SW-PBIS address universal expectations (tier one) that are aligned with a common vision and use instruction to teach social or behavioral skills and provide supplemental (tier two) and

intensive (tier three) support for identified students (McIntosh et. al., 2014). In order to achieve the expected results of any evidence-based intervention or program for academics or behavior, it is necessary to implement it as prescribed, meaning one cannot expect the intended outcomes if variations or only portions of a program were implemented. Implementing the SW-PBIS framework with fidelity has shown a decrease in office discipline referrals and in- and out-of-school suspensions (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Carroll, 2008; Curtis et. al., 2010; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

Another approach to improving behavioral outcomes for students that entered into the world of education in the 1990s is the Restorative Justice framework. Restorative practices were born out of Indigenous traditions and were adopted into the criminal justice system before being adapted into school environments. The implication of using the term "restorative justice" in a school setting could unintentionally criminalize students with the use of specific vocabulary such as justice, offender, and victim. Therefore, some school leaders (including myself) have also chosen to use the terms restorative practices and restorative discipline instead. Winn (2018) contended that by opting for the term "restorative practices", educators avoid the more difficult work of "restorative justice," stating, "the concept of justice in restorative justice is the purposeful attempt to disrupt cycles of injustice and inequality (p. 7). However, Winn (2018) and Zehr (2015) agreed that within a school environment, the focus of this approach is to build positive relationships between all stakeholders, to develop an understanding that all words and actions have a direct impact on the school community, to create a space where everyone's voice is heard, and to intentionally repair the relationships when harm has occurred (Mergler et. al., 2014).

According to Zehr (2015), "restorative justice is about prevention of harm as well as justice after harm has occurred" (p. 33), which allows for participants to "make things right." In traditional school disciplinary practices, the focus is for the adult to dispense a punitive consequence to the offender with the intention that this makes the offending student take responsibility for their actions (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). In these cases, the victim or person that was harmed does not have a voice nor an opportunity to share what they need for resolution. Behavior is a form of communication and misbehavior in students communicates a need that must be met. Provided that the teacher has not misrepresented a student's actions, using restorative practices in a school setting not only allows for the healing of the relationships but for all participants to have a platform to have their needs met. Punishment alone will not break the cycle of victimization, as offenders often us misbehavior "as an effort to undo a sense of victimization" (Zehr, 2015, p. 41). Research has shown that these practices are effective in reducing office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, and decreasing the rate of recidivism for student offenders when implemented with fidelity (Davidson, 2014; Skiba & Losen, 2016; Skiba et. al., 2014).

Improving student behavior so that the focus can be on the teaching and learning that occurs in a school building is also directly correlated to the degree of positive climate and culture of a school. The National Center on Safe Supporting Learning Environments (2020) outlined the factors that contribute to a positive school climate on their website as "fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting and caring relationships" (n.p.). It can be inferred that implementing SW-PBIS and Restorative

Practices in a school would naturally foster a positive climate. However, literature exists that supports that it is the school principal who plays a pivotal role in establishing a positive school climate and culture (Benda & Wright, 2002; Tlusciak-Deliowska et. al., 2017; Skiba & Edl, 2004; Smith et. al., 2014). The culture and climate of a school has a significant impact on student achievement, both academic and behavioral outcomes. School leaders are charged with creating a vision, gathering support from teachers and staff to implement systems and practices that will support positive outcomes for all students. Two alternative approaches to school discipline that could be considered for implementation as one initiative are SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices.

Statement of the Problem

No one practice, philosophy, or program is expected to be effective in addressing the social justice issue of racial disproportionality in school discipline. Currently, there is limited research on the blending of SW-PBIS and Restorative Circles being implemented with fidelity in schools. While SW-PBIS entered into the educational setting in the late 1980s, Restorative Justice in Education is a more unchartered territory, starting in the 1990s. Additionally, there is limited research available that addresses the effectiveness of the dual implementation of SW-PBIS and Restorative Justice for reducing suspensions among Black students. While these are definite gaps in the literature, a larger disparity exists within the literature that addresses the personal experiences of school principals and analyzing their own beliefs, biases, and perceptions while implementing SW-PBIS and Restorative Justice through a lens of their race, gender, and positions of power, and how they influence perceptions of school climate. It is this gap in the research that fueled the purpose of this study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore my experiences as a white, female principal with the dual implementation of SW-PBIS with Restorative Circle practices at a Title I elementary school with 60% students of color within a school district that still maintains a traditional punitive approach to school discipline. The traditional punitive school discipline maintains a systemic approach to offenses and negative consequences such as in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS) which also include zero-tolerance policies. While focusing on implementation planning and strategies, professional development, and the perceived impact on the school's climate and discipline data, this study intended to provide insight into how I navigate competing ideologies, philosophies, systems, and practices, along with the dynamics of race and power. This study could potentially inform other school administrators interested in exploring alternative approaches to traditional disciplinary practices.

Through my study, I embarked on a journey of self-analysis by employing an autoethnographic research design in order to address the following research questions:

1) How has implementing restorative practices and SW-PBIS simultaneously within a diverse, Title I, urban-like school helped to shape my beliefs as a white female administrator?
2) As a white female principal, what are my perceptions of the staff response to a blended model of SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices?
3) How do I, as a white female principal, contribute to the environment that produces discipline disparities? How do I combat it?

The answers to these questions have the potential to uncover my hidden truths and biases that underpin the qualities, tools, and strategies that I chose in order to change the traditional punitive culture of a school where race is believed to play a significant role in the outcomes. School leaders are consistently pressed to be innovative and implement changes that will increase student achievement and establish a culture of excellence. They employ a variety of strategies and approaches dependent upon the task at hand and the stakeholders involved. This is not a new concept but through this study, I was able to consider the subjective and otherwise unmeasurable aspects of being a white female school leader affecting change in the landscape of school discipline.

Female leaders face different challenges than their male counterparts, ranging from combatting the traditional perceptions of power and control issues, emotional weaknesses, and inferiority to balancing the other roles such as wife, mother, and friend (Lawson, 2008; O'Connor, 2018). By adding the complexity of race to the scenario, I was able to reflect and explore different aspect of myself that fuel my decisions and actions in a school with urban characteristics (Milner, 2012).

Traditional school discipline punitive practices are ingrained in the very fabric of our educational system and have been for centuries. Using my role as a school principal to initiate a paradigm shift and support teachers and staff in doing so proved to be more complex than anticipated. Taking into consideration that a school principal is not always privy to the underground network of conversations, actions, and beliefs of staff, there was a distinct possibility that those may contradict the perceptions that they may have regarding the climate and culture of their school.

Theoretical Framework

Exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion have been the backbone of traditional school discipline constructs. In response to the tragedy at Columbine High School, states across the nation adopted zero-tolerance policies in an effort to maintain safe and orderly schools (Skiba, 2014). School districts generalized these policies to include minor school-based offenses such as fighting, smoking, disruption, and disrespect (Stinson & Watkins, 2014). These policies, in conjunction with the increased presence of School Resource Officers in schools, have led to the criminalization of these minor offenses and, as such, have adversely affected students of color (Skiba et. al., 2014). Black students found themselves being “pushed out” of schools and into the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba, 2014). The school-to-prison pipeline is a system in which Black students are funneled into the criminal justice system through the use of traditional school disciplinary practices and exclusionary consequences (Losen, 2015).

Traditional school discipline systems, policies, and practices can be analyzed by looking at them through the lenses of power and race, hinging on access to knowledge. There is a hierarchical structure to traditional schooling that is founded on the power of authority and who has power over whom. Tracing the history of American education, one is quick to identify how those in power used the concept of race to delineate further who had power over whom. It would be remiss if this study neglected to consider the impact of race, knowledge, and power structures as they intertwine within the school’s disciplinary system.

It is salient to first understand Critical Theory as it provides a foundational context from which Critical Race Theory is derived. The roots of Critical Theory can be traced back to the works of social theorists Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, however, Jurgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School of Scholars are given the credit for developing this theoretical framework. Marx analyzed class relations and social conflict as a basis to justify how the societal hierarchical structures are dependent on each other for society to work. Domination and oppression are considered the problems of this societal structure and thus spurn desires for a classless society. To explain the relationship between class relations and ideology, Marx stated, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch of the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (as cited in Morrison, 2006, p. 72). At a macro level, the dominant class perpetuates its ideology throughout all facets of society such as the economic, political, and educational systems.

Contemporary critical theorists intertwine the relationship between knowledge and power in order to examine the structures of schools and explain how dominant groups can remain in their positions of power. As cited in deMarrais & LeCompte (1999), Jurgen Habermas and Michel Foucault posited that possessing knowledge is power and the lack thereof sustains inequality in society. However, educational systems are more complex than that and require further critical analysis to determine the salient factors contributing to hierarchical structures of dominance and oppression. Schools are one hegemonic agency where they "reflect the ideologies advocated by the very state agencies that regulate the schooling process" (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 17). As such, human agency and advocacy can work against these hegemonic ideologies to usurp

inequitable systems and practices. By advocating respect for the cultures of a diverse student population, educators can increase knowledge, thus transferring a platform of power to students.

Critical Race Theory

One major deficit of Critical Theory is that it neglects to consider the impact of race in a phenomenon. Substantial research can be found that describes the phenomena of racial disparities in the educational setting and therefore, Critical Race Theory is the guiding framework for this study.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that the segregation of schools was unconstitutional and seemingly turned the tide in establishing racial equity in our schools. Unfortunately, with closer scrutiny, it in fact only "altered the racial appearance of the dual systems without eliminating racial discrimination" (Bell, 1980, p. 531). While school districts focused on racially balancing schools with student and teacher populations, they did nothing to address racial discrimination of the past or for the future because it was not required by law. However, in his seminal work, Bell (1980) discussed how whites were able to leverage this new law to their advantage through a principle of interest convergence. "The principle of interest convergence provides: the interest of Blacks in achieving racial equity will only be accommodated when it converges with the interests of whites" (Bell, 1980, p. 523). Those in power such as policymakers capitalized on how this law improved America's reputation and furthered industrialization efforts in the South that were hindered by segregation.

The desegregation of schools was met with contention and the anti-defiance remedies towards the Brown decision were predicated on associational interpretations, meaning that as the law provides for Black people to choose to associate with white people, and therefore, white people believed they also should be afforded that choice. This became evident through demographic patterns, school attendance zones, busing plans, “white flight”, and school choice that is still present today.

The inequities present in our society today are grounded in racism and preserved through oppressive systems that maintain the racial status quo. The ideology of the dominant class, which is markedly present in our schools, dictates the narrative that is told and subsequently devalues the counter narratives. Therefore, it is pertinent to acknowledge the importance of considering a critical race lens in this study. “According to Critical Race Theory (CRT), racial inequality emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences that white people create between ‘races’ to maintain elite white interest in labour markets and politics and as such create the circumstances that give rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities” (Curry, 2016, p. 1). Our educational systems are not exempt from the critical eye that illuminates how racial inequalities are taught, perpetuated, and sustained through subtle and overt policies and practices.

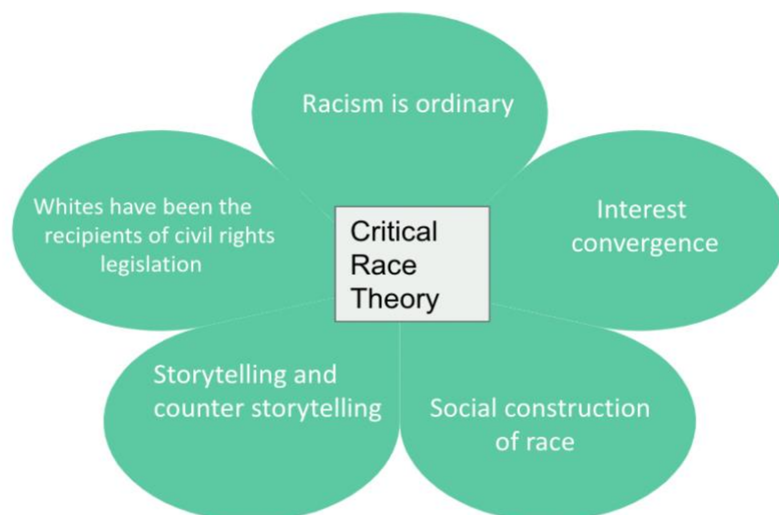

Figure 1. Critical Race Theory Graphic. This figure conceptualizes the five tenets of Critical Race Theory.

The five tenets of Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) offer an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the various facets of society and education in which racism lies. In the context of schooling, these tenets become the required lens through which educators view efforts to equalize educational opportunities for our marginalized populations.

First, racism is ordinary and woven into the fabric of our society in such a way that one would not necessarily recognize it without conscious analysis, meaning it is institutionalized and not limited to overt, racist actions. The ideas of colorblindness and meritocracy actually work to maintain the ethnocentric ideologies that permeate and plague every facet of our society, including education. Colorblindness legitimizes the need for the existence of "the other" and meritocracy rewards so-called hard work and effort, which implies culpability for the individual and not the systems that perpetuate inequality in an oppressive institutional system. Through this, members of the dominant culture can maintain a neutrality that exonerates them from responsibility of the

exploitation of those in minority and from feeling the guilt of maintaining control of power, wealth, and opportunity. Gorski (2000) stated "that is the ultimate luxury of whiteness; the ability to see myself from any responsibility for addressing racial issues in education, society in general, and most importantly, myself" (p. 1). By taking this passive approach to addressing racial inequality in education, educators become complicit in sustaining and in truth, covering up racism and classism. Berry and Candis (2013) further expounded upon CRT in education when applying the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) to demonstrate how access to education is directly proportional to race and property ownership and, in essence, sustains the very ideals that underpin social stratification of the classes.

Educational reform initiatives have trended in focus of multiculturalism and understanding the culture of poverty as an attempt to close the achievement gap while neglecting to address racial inequalities head on. However, Gorski discredited these initiatives as a holistic means by which to right these injustices, stating "…racial identities may inform cultural identities, racial identities aren't predominately cultural misunderstandings. Racism is a tangled structural mess of power, oppression, and unjust distributions of access and opportunity" (Gorski, 2019, p. 58). The curriculum and pedagogical practices in a school should become the starting point from which authentic dialogue can begin to uncover the racism (institutional and personal) and classism that the ethnocentric systems and narratives have fought so hard to sustain.

The second tenet supports the idea of an interest convergence. Explained by Hartlep (2009), "interest convergence is the notion that whites will allow and support racial justice/progress to the extent that there is something positive in it for them, or a

'convergence' between the interests of whites and non-whites" (p. 7). This maintains the status quo for the dominant culture (whites) and continues to oppress "the others" (non-Hispanic whites).

The social construction of race is the third tenet and is quite self-explanatory—the notion of race was constructed in an effort to maintain whites in positions of power and privilege throughout history. Beginning with the African Slave Trade through the Jim Crow Era and the "one drop rule," the notion of race was created to continue the efforts of maintaining wealth and power for whites in a post-Feudalistic society. This is further evidenced in government laws and policies of the latter half of the 20th century through present day such as racial profiling and policing, discriminatory housing and mortgage practices, and redlining districts which promoted segregation of neighborhoods (Rios, 2011; Rothstein, 2017).

The fourth tenet focuses on storytelling and counter storytelling. What narratives are told that support Eurocentric ideologies, beliefs, and practices? Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) challenged us as they defined storytelling as scholarship that integrates lived experience with racial realism. Schools are a microcosm of society and even at a surface level, it is easy to see that our schools are inherently inequitable for our students of color. Evidence of these inequities are seen in what perspectives are taught in the curricula, graduation rates, enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, achievement gaps, and disproportionality in student discipline and special education identification.

Finally, the fifth tenet addresses the notion that whites have been recipients of civil rights legislation. Taylor (2009) illuminated how these policies continue to sustain racist agendas as he eloquently explained:

> "Fifty years post *Brown, de jure* separation has been replaced by *de facto* segregation, as white flight from public schools has created a two-tiered system in many cities and student assignments have shifted from mandatory busing to neighborhood preferences. Most children of color currently attend schools with relatively few whites; very few white children attend schools where they are the minority. Clarenton, South Carolina, one of the case schools used by civil rights lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston, remains as segregated as it was before 1954. The educational progress of African Americans that has occurred has thus been allowed only if it is perceived by the majority as cost-free, or nearly so. Preferably, these changes have come incrementally, and without social disruptions such as marches, boycotts, and riots. Importantly, for most whites, advances must come without affirmative action" (pp. 6-7).

Using Critical Race Theory as a lens through which to view this societal issue in education, research has demonstrated that a student's race either increases or decreases the chance that the student will be suspended. "Scholars have looked to CRT, as an epistemological and methodological tool, to help analyze the experiences of historically under-represented populations across the K-20 educational pipeline" (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015, p. 206). Therefore, using this lens to explore the issue of school discipline disproportionality, this study will provide additional credence to the impact of race in a school setting.

All five tenets of Critical Race Theory were applicable and guide the theoretical application to this study. Using the idea that racism is ordinary and embedded in our educational systems and practices challenged me to seek out such evidence as I analyzed and reflected upon my beliefs and perceptions within our systems and practices. The tenet of interest convergence provided an angle of analysis to uncover how our structures secretly perpetuate racial discrimination to afford the dominant culture to remain in positions of power. As a member of the dominant culture and as one in a position of power, I had the opportunity to expose to myself how my own race and position of power

influenced my beliefs and perceptions while hoping to be an agent of change in the larger systems of education. Focusing on these five tenets provided a critical framework by which to analyze how my race, gender, and position of power underpin my perceptions, beliefs, and decisions during this study. How I perceived and experienced my own whiteness as a lens through which to apply these tenets played a significant role in shaping the outcome of this study.

Overview of Context and Methods

Glesne (2016) quoted Ellis (2009) as stating "As an autoethnographer, I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created" (p. 259). This research study employed an authoethnographic design that explores my experiences as a white, female Title 1 elementary school principal and how they influence my beliefs and perceptions of our school climate when implementing SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices in tandem.

I am the principal of Wilson Elementary School (a pseudonym), a diverse Title 1 school in North Carolina. The school has approximately 750 students with the demographics of 40% African American, 30% Hispanic, and 30% white. The number of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch benefits fluctuates between 60 – 70%. The demographics of the staff are approximately 96% white female teachers, 2% African American female staff, and 2% Hispanic staff. Historically, across the nation, a diversity gap exists between white teachers and students of color. Data gathered from the Center for American Progress (2014) report indicated the national average Teacher Diversity Index Score is 30 (p. 4), which is based on the difference between the percentage of students of color and white teachers. As the principal, I have been responsible for the

hiring of staff over the past three years, at the time of this study. Knowing the importance of hiring diverse staff, I have to question why I have not been able to hire more candidates that are representative of the diverse cultures of the students.

In 2016, our State Board of Education adopted the policy *Reform for Recurring Low-Performing Schools* as an attempt to ultimately improve student outcomes in these schools. There are four reform models for which districts/schools could apply: Transformation, Turnaround, Restart, and Closure. The Restart Model provides charter school-like flexibilities such as budget, staffing, calendar, and assessment by which the Local Education Agency (LEA) and school principal can implement innovative ideas to ensure all students receive a sound and basic education. Wilson Elementary School is labeled as a Low-Performing School by its governing state education agency and is in its third year using a Restart School Reform Model. While there are currently five schools in the district operating in the Restart Reform Model, as the principal, I have tailored our flexibilities to support and focus on implementing SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices.

For the school year 2017 – 2018, the staff implemented SW-PBIS and Restorative Justice circles simultaneously for the first time under my leadership. Using the research that I had gathered, I created professional development sessions for the staff and provided this training prior to the school year starting. Our school may be the only elementary school that is implementing SW-PBIS and Restorative Justice circles. While most elementary schools do implement SW-PBIS, most include a variation of morning meetings, which is quite different from restorative circles. Morning meetings typically are agenda driven and teacher led. While these meetings develop community and have a structure, they focus on an activity and any announcements for the day. Restorative

circles have a specific format, are teacher facilitated, and focus on building trust and empathy as a strong foundation for resolving classroom conflicts and issues.

When I was first assigned as the principal, I was told by a member of the district leadership team that I was placed here for a reason. I interpreted that statement to mean that I should focus on addressing low-performing teachers. I had a feeling that had been a focus of the previous principals and that alone did not result in higher student achievement. Since the state had labeled our school as a "D" school and low-performing, raising student achievement needed to be the top priority. When I first visited the classrooms and saw the teaching that was occurring, it just did not make sense. The majority of the teachers were utilizing sound instructional strategies and working extremely hard. However, I definitely saw other areas in need of improvement.

From my very first interviews with staff, I was told about how negative the school climate was and that student discipline was "out of control". Walking the halls, I could hear teachers and students yelling at each other. I saw students excluded from instruction by sitting in hallways and even worse, in a room with other students whom the teachers did not want in their classrooms at the time. There was little rhyme or reason for it and generally speaking, the school administrators did not realize this was happening. I felt like I just walked into a hornets' nest of toxic behaviors and beliefs. I questioned myself and wondered if my ideas alone could be a catalyst for change or if I thought of myself as a "savior," which would perpetuate my role as an authoritative figure and member of the dominant culture.

Already believing that I need to move us to implementing SW-PBIS with fidelity, I also needed to do something to repair the relationships between all of the stakeholders.

Coincidentally, I had begun reading the research surrounding restorative justice and restorative practices in my doctoral program and after reading *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015), I found my compelling why. Not only did I have that moment of connection, but I had a blueprint of what restorative practices could look like in action. I felt compelled to take a chance and see if we could make it work at our school. I admit that I did struggle letting go of the perceived pressure I felt to focus solely on the quality of instruction. According to everything that I understood about being a principal at a low-performing school, my job hinged on the expectation of moving the school out of low-performing status. At this point, I was not sure I would even have district approval for this endeavor in lieu of taking a targeted approach of improving academic instruction.

The discipline data at our school for the 2018 – 2019 school year indicated that our Black students had a higher rate of office referrals compared to their white peers: 54% of all office referrals were for Black students while they only represented 40% of the total school population. Our white students were represented in 21% of the office referrals and 30% in total school enrollment. Upon further inspection of the data from that school year, it revealed that male students also received more office referrals than females; 51% of the student population are males and they made up approximately 70% of the total office referrals. Black males received 63% of our office referrals and Black females were 36%, compared to 24% white males and 15% white females. Traditional school disciplinary practices were not effective in addressing the disproportionality in our data and I believed that addressing the disparities at our school by implementing these two approaches with fidelity, grounded in research, would be the catalyst to reimagining school discipline at our school.

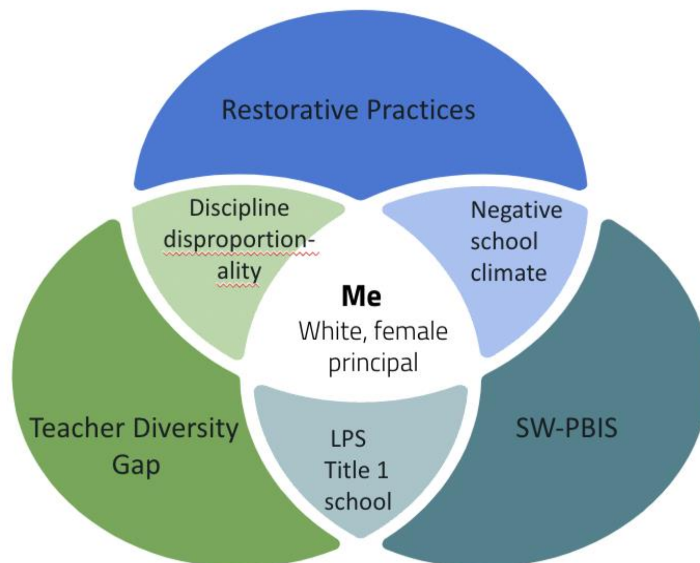

Figure 2. Context of the Study. This figure illustrates the factors that provide a context to the study.

Significance of Study

The pressure to increase student performance is constant and school administrators can read hundreds of books, research papers, and even attend professional development conferences to enhance their leadership skills. Through collaboration, we share ideas and resources to support the practices that we implement. However, in my short tenure of four years at the time of this study, I have found that nothing I have read or learned truly addressed how my personal experiences and biases play a role in my own challenges as a school leader when trying to employ the latest acquisitions of knowledge into practice.

My experiences as a white female principal are unique and complete with challenges, struggles, mistakes, and celebrations. There is not a manual on how to balance my biases, acknowledge my own whiteness and gender, and grapple with trying

to lead change at a school with a diverse population. This is something that is generally left out from the professional development and readings we do as school administrators. My study offers my personal perspective of implementing these initiatives as I analyze and come to terms with my own race and gender with which other school administrators may identify.

Limitations

There are certain limitations that may impact the generalizability of this study. The research design of autoethnography is personal to the researcher and the study itself. Another researcher conducting the same study would most likely report different experiences and results. The site of this study is in a southern school system that maintains a traditional disciplinary system which might very well limit the scope of the study and the fidelity of implementation of Restorative Justice.

Delimitations

There is only one foreseeable delimitation to this study at this time. The site and participant are restricted to the school at which the researcher is the principal.

Positionality

My first encounter with racism occurred when I was eight years old. At the time, I did not know the name for it but I can recall the memory like it was yesterday. My parents moved the family to North Carolina from New York in the summer of 1979. The family of my best friend also relocated to the area and I could not have been happier. While I was not acutely aware of the differences in our skin color, I did come to realize the magnitude of an “inter-racial friendship” very quickly.

She and I were excited to spend one hot, sticky summer day at the neighborhood swim club and quickly jumped in the shallow end of the swimming pool. All at once, the other children started getting out of the pool, either by their choice or that of their parents. Soon, we were the only two children in the pool. Being naïve, I did not connect those actions with my best friend being Black, but my mother sure did. My mother did not hesitate to make sure I understood the significance of our experience and how wrong that it was.

I was thrilled when I learned that my best friend would be moving into a house right up the street from us! We talked and planned out how we would spend every afternoon together. I could not wait! But, unbeknownst to me, the builder had refused to sell the family the house once he had found out they were Black. I was devastated. Our plans disintegrated with just one phone call. My best friend moved to the city instead and we drifted apart. My mother and father were very outspoken against what had happened and did what they could to protest the builder and get that decision overturned., if not for my friend's family, but for future residents. Unfortunately, in 1979, that wasn't going to happen.

My mother was always fighting the injustices of the world, much to my chagrin. As a middle school student, I remained in a perpetual state of embarrassment as my mother "created a stink" about religious reading material made available in my classrooms or threatening store owners with an OSHA complaint if items were in the aisle floors. She was very clear that not every student nor customer knew the laws or their rights and she felt it was her duty to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all.

I began to follow in my mother's example and in my papers and school projects. I often took an activist approach without really realizing it. As an adult, it became a defining part of who I am and what I believe. Caring for people and what is right and just remains in the forefront of all that I do. This is also evident in my leadership style, as I want to be inclusive, and I value the knowledge, skills, and expertise of others. I am more responsive than reactive, more reflective and seeking more to understand all points of view in order to make an informed decision. My heart is in helping our minoritized populations find their voice and know that they too have an important seat at the table. Throughout my career thus far, I have maintained this focus, mostly in part thanks to my mother and her fearless approach to righting the injustices in our community.

I have served in public education for 25 years in the roles of a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and state department of public instruction behavior support consultant. My passion for supporting students with challenging behaviors and also transforming school climate began in my role as an assistant principal at a Title 1 elementary school. I saw firsthand how a toxic, punitive school culture created a negative climate where students of color were the recipients of exclusionary practices for minor, subjective offenses at disproportionate rates compared to their white counterparts.

My experience of implementing SW-PBIS over the course of eight years allowed me to see firsthand the school culture and climate transform to a positive, inclusive learning environment. Office referrals and suspensions decreased by over 60% and attendance, achievement, and staff satisfaction survey results increased dramatically. However, our Black students were still referred to the office at a disproportionate compared to their white peers. When I transitioned to working for our state department of

public instruction, my experience expanded to working with many school districts focusing on improving school discipline and discipline disproportionality.

As a white, female principal at a very diverse, Title 1, low-performing school, I continue to have the same experiences and the same outcomes for our Black students. One area that I have never considered exploring is my own whiteness and the impact that has on how I implement initiatives at my school. Would a Black female principal experience different results if the context and setting were the same? The lens through which I view the work I do and how that impacts how I do the work must have a significant impact on the results. I wonder, if at my core, I am doing this "to" our students of color and not "with" them, meaning, do I see myself as the great white savior who will remedy the injustices of education or am I continuing my mom's mission? Will spending time being introspective and analyzing how my whiteness plays a role in my outcomes be a significant factor? I have never explored the angle of my whiteness as a part of the work I do as a school administrator. As I think of this now, I feel shame for that. In all of my touting of racial equity, I cannot recall a time where I took a step back and considered my race as an influencer of my perceptions and beliefs towards school discipline. This realization brings a renewed sense of excitement towards my study and also a new sense of discomfort or fear as to what I may discover.

Through my enrollment in the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program with an emphasis in Urban Education, I have read research on this topic. While my professional and educational experiences fuel my research agenda, I recognize my potential bias with this study. My role as the principal at the school where I am conducting this autoethnographic study could also impact the objectivity of the project. I

will have to take careful measures to ensure that my reflective journal entries are honest and do not hide my discomforts or any unpopular realizations. Furthermore, I must remain objective with my data analysis and not seek out any results that I hope for.

Organization of Study

This autoethnographic study was organized into five sections or chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction that outlines the context for the study and the focus of the research. Chapter Two discusses the relevant literature that informs this study. Chapter Three explains the methodology that was used to conduct this study. Chapter Four includes the results of the study. The discussion of the results and findings of this study is shared in Chapter Five.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study and discussions thereof, specific terminology was used in reference to leadership styles, educational programs and practices, and school stakeholders. To avoid misconceptions and develop a common understanding of terms, these definitions are provided for the readers.

At-Risk / High Needs School: a school with a high percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch benefits and low achievement

Black: this term indicates the racial construct that is representative of this group

Discipline Data: data related to office discipline referrals, minor classroom incident referrals, suspensions (in and out of school), and expulsions

Discipline Disproportionality: the overrepresentation of Black or students of color in school discipline data compared to the total number of student population in a school

Distributive Leadership: focusing on the practice of leadership at all levels as opposed to focusing on the roles and responsibilities

Diverse: high percentages of multiple races, ethnicities, and cultures represented where the percentage of white students is equal to or less than the others

Low-Performing School: a school that has been labeled low-performing based on the state's accountability model and consistently low percentages of student achievement

Marginalized Populations: groups excluded based on race, religion, political or cultural group, for example

Minoritized Populations: people (students) who face prejudices based on issues of which they do not control, for example, racism

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): an integrated instructional support framework for behavior and academics that utilizes a universal screener to provide targeted supports for students and data-based decision making

Racial Discipline Disproportionality: disparity in the percentages of students of color enrollments and percentages of office discipline referrals for students of color

Restorative Circles: one method of building community, fostering positive relationships, and resolving conflicts using a circle format and protocol (Zehr, 2015)

Restorative Conferencing (RC): a meeting with a victim, offender, and others to work towards the resolution of a conflict or incident (Wachtel, O'Connell, & Wachtel, 2010)

Restorative Justice (RJ): (in schools) the practice that creates opportunity for mediation, conflict resolution, and a chance to be heard (Holtham, 2009; Winn, 2018)

Restorative Practices (RP): practices that focus on relationship building, problem-solving where one method used is circles (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015)

School Resource Officer (SRO): The U. S. Department of Justice defines SROs as "sworn law enforcement officers responsible for safety and crime prevention in schools"

School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SW-PBIS): a framework that focuses on prevention of misbehavior and providing targeted support for students using a data-based decision-making process (Sugai & Horner, 2020; www.pbis.org)

Shared Leadership: style of leadership where roles and responsibilities are distributed

Students of Color: racial construct of all students representative of African American, Black, Hispanic, Latino/a groups, excluding those that are representative of the white group

Title 1: federally funded program that provides additional funding to districts for schools that have higher rates of poverty

Urban Schools: schools in or near urban areas that serve students that may be characterized as having low economic status and/or academic achievement, are ethnically diverse and have high rates of mobility

Whiteness: racial construct created to legally separate those with a lack of melanin from slaves; a social exclusionary category marked by privileges not afforded to people of color

White Privilege: "an institutional, rather than personal, set of benefits granted to those of who, by race, resemble the people who hold the power positions in our institutions" (Kendall, 2013, p. 62)

White Fragility: "an outcome of white people's socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 113)

Zero-Tolerance Policies: require school administrators to assign specific consequences (punishment) for predetermined school offenses, such as suspension or expulsion

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Race has been at the crux of many divides throughout American history. It is a socially constructed tool used to maintain a stratified society where people of color remain marginalized while the white dominant race continues to have the advantage. Colonists used race to justify slavery and it became woven into the fabric of American society. Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation until President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Prior to that, the landmark decision in the case of Brown v. the Board of Education kicked off the Civil Rights movement in 1954. Laws, while necessary to formally end racial segregation, did little to disrupt structural and systemic racism that is pervasive in our societal constructs today.

Critical social justice calls for addressing the gap between the ideal and current practices to disrupt our racially stratified systems, especially in education where the disparities are alarmingly evident. With *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), the United States Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for states to segregate schools by race. While this proved to be a turning point for the American Civil Rights Movement, discrimination and the lasting effects of racism continue to impact students today across the nation. Opportunity gaps and discipline disparities plague our schools and the ones that are affected and placed at a disadvantage the most are our minority and marginalized students. My belief is that by improving our disciplinary practices, we can mitigate the path to having opportunity gaps with our minoritized students. If I can keep a

student in the classroom, that student has a greater likelihood of learning.

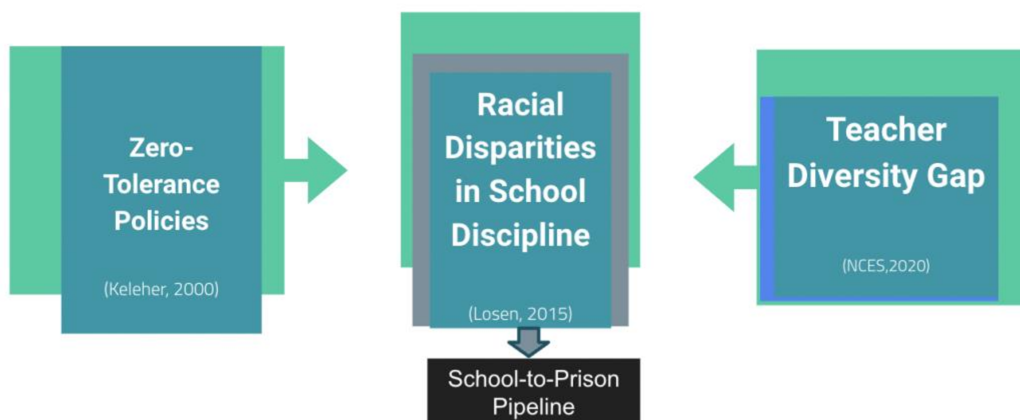

Figure 3. Relevant Literature. This figure illustrates the background of relevant literature for this study.

As a school principal, synthesizing specific literature provides the context in which I can situate my study. Developing an understanding of the inequities placed on students of color, specifically African American male students, with school disciplinary practices frames the social justice problem in which my study operates. For this, I explored the racial disparities in school discipline before discussing racial and cultural threat. In order to make informed decisions with regards to school discipline reform and critically reflect upon those decisions, I have to know the history and understand the impact of zero-tolerance policies, school resource officer placements in schools in conjunction with the adverse effects of out-of-school suspensions. Knowledge of the teacher diversity gap is relevant to my study with regards to understanding the influence of the race of teachers on their classroom practices. I have to know the research behind the two approaches of SW-PBIS and Restorative Justice that I have chosen, why I chose them, and how I chose to lead those initiatives. Learning about culturally responsive

leadership provides yet another lens through which to measure how I view myself as a leader and identify the discrepancies between what I believe, say and do. At the crux of it all, I must own my identity as a white female principal and unpack my own implicit bias to fully grasp how the intersection of my race, gender, and position of power ultimately influences my beliefs and perceptions of the school climate.

Teacher Diversity Gap

It stands to reason, then, one way to counteract the impact of implicit bias, cultural, and racial threat is to employ school staff that are equally representative of the student population. Unfortunately, not only is the percentage of Black students suspended disproportionate with the student population, but there is also a diversity gap between teachers and students. In a survey of teacher demographics, Feistitzer (2011) found that 84% of public-school teachers were White, 7% were Black, 6% Hispanic, and 4% were other. The percentages have not changed much over seven years, as Hussar et al. (2020) reported that 79.3% of public-school teachers were White, 6.7% were Black, 9.3% were Hispanic, and 4.7% were other during the 2017 – 2018 school year. Comparing these percentages to the demographic data for students of color during the same year clearly shows that the percentages of Black and Hispanic students are double and triple the percentages of teachers of color: Black 6.7% teachers to 15.2% students; Hispanic 9.3% teachers to 26.8% students, Asian 2.1% teachers to 5.2% students, Pacific Islander .2% teachers to .4% students, American Indian/Alaska Native .5% teachers to 1% students, and two or more races 1.8% teachers to 3.9% students (NCES, 2020). As students of color make up over 50% of the nation's student population and projected to continue to

increase, it is imperative that efforts are made to recruit and retain teachers of color in our public schools.

Using a Teacher Diversity Index, the Center for American Progress (2014) determined that though all students, in particular students of color, do need interactions with people of diverse backgrounds, students of color perform “better on a variety of academic outcomes if they are taught by teachers of color” (para. 4). However, improved academic outcomes are not the only benefits for students. Lee (2020) contended that they are uniquely posed to offer a “pedagogy as a lived expression and as an extension of that person” (p.24). For example, a Black teacher may possess a critical lens to support diverse students racially and linguistically, not trying to “fix” language that does not comply with White mainstream English grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Additionally, in a study reported by the Kirwan Institute, when white and Black students were placed in classrooms with teachers of the same race, Black students’ behavior was viewed more favorably than the behavior of white students (Rudd, 2015). Measures beyond academics and behavior, such as graduation and absenteeism rates, improve for diverse students when they are being taught by a teacher who represents the same race and ethnic background as they do (Rafa & Roberts, 2020). Based on the data findings of the Teacher Diversity Index and a growing body of research, the demographics of our teacher workforce must shift to reflect a more comparable representation of the students’ races and ethnicities. However, our teachers of color cannot be expected to shoulder this responsibility alone. We must better equip White teachers in working with students whose races and cultures differ.

Racial Disparities in School Discipline

Exclusionary school discipline practices have a direct impact on educational attainment for our minoritized students. Quite simply, if students are not in classrooms learning, they have a decreased likelihood of attaining a high school diploma. “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunities of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available on equal terms” said Justice Earl Warren (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954).

While Justice Warren was speaking in context of the Supreme Court decision that separate schools for Blacks and Whites were not equal and thus in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, the same idea can be applied today in the context of the disproportionate rate that our African American students are being suspended and/or expelled in our public schools. When a student is suspended or expelled, in essence, it takes away their opportunity for a sound and basic education.

Americans have been working to turn the tides of racial discrimination that are embedded deep within our history. “Although American slaves were emancipated as a result of the Civil War and were then granted basic civil rights through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution, struggles to secure federal protection of these rights continued to during the next century” (Carson, 2015). The American Civil Rights Movement brought racial discrimination to the forefront of society and though progress has been made, it has not been enough. Outrage for racial injustice has been increasing in momentum over the last few years. In 2020, the death of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer ignited a nationwide outcry and demand for

social justice. The handling of the siege on the nation's Capitol building with regards to the stark difference of the judicial responses between white and Black protestors illuminated racism in our country. Schools are a microcosm of our society and it is easy to identify racial inequities in school discipline.

In 1975, the Children's Defense Fund issued a report that identified high rates of disproportionality with school discipline and African American students. African American students were suspended at twice the rate of their White counterparts, totaling 2/3 of the nation's suspensions in the 1972-1973 school year (Rudd, 2015). In a 2018 report to Congressional Requesters, the United States Government Accountability Office clearly indicated that the disproportionate rates (23% overrepresentation) of Black students being suspended continue to plague public schools.

Arguments have been made that racial bias does not play a significant role in disparities in school discipline (Eden, 2019) and Anderson and Ritter (2017) reported findings from their study that while racial disparity existed across schools, within the schools, a reduction in the disparity existed for race but increased with free and reduced lunch percentages. However consistently mounting research indicates that even after controlling for poverty and types of misbehavior, racial differences persist (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bryant & Wilson, 2020; Skiba et al., 2016). Research also suggests that the primary offenses for which the suspensions occurred were due to more non-violent, non-dangerous acts that were subjective in nature such as disrespect, disruption, non-compliance, and defiance (Bal, 2018; Losen, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Smolkowski et al., 2016). While America's schools are still suspending African American students at twice the rate or higher of white students (Losen, 2015), the implementation of zero-tolerance

policies has been linked to substantial increases with the disparities in school discipline data.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

During the 1980s, the United States Customs Agency instituted a zero-tolerance policy to combat drug trade prevalent on ships and vehicles entering the country. Zero-tolerance policies gained momentum and hit the national spotlight in 1986, when U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese and U.S. Attorney Peter Nunez authorized the seizure and impoundment of ships and vehicles, along with any property of those operating the vehicles, and prosecuted the owners in federal court for even the slightest trace of illegal drugs (Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Verdugo & Glenn, 2002). These actions were questioned as to be in violation with discrimination policies and laws. As such, the use of zero-tolerance policies were phased out from the U.S. Customs Agency but somehow made the transition into public education in response to the growing concerns of drugs, violence and gangs. In 1994, under the Clinton Administration, the Guns Free School Act allowed for states to adopt “zero-tolerance” policies for which they expanded to encompass many offenses, including those less serious than the original intent for addressing firearms and explosive devices. Reports of students being suspended under zero-tolerance gun policies include elementary school students suspended for bringing Nerf guns to school, an 8-year-old suspended for drawing a ninja with a gun, and a 7-year-old for chewing a Pop Tart into the shape of a gun (Hawkins, 2015). The misuse and abuse of zero-tolerance policies by school administrators exacerbated suspension and expulsion rates across the nation, especially for African American students (Keleher, 2000). Exclusionary practices for school discipline perpetuate the effects of racial

discrimination in our public schools. Fortunately, many states, including the one where this study took place, have removed these policies and schools are looking to alternative practices with the exception of cases where guns are involved.

Given that principals have the autonomy to decide how to respond to incidents of misbehavior, punitive consequences or restorative practices, it is important to consider the perceptions of school discipline of the principal. Skiba and Edl (2004) conducted a study on those perceptions of principals in Indiana and concluded that principals who implemented more preventative measures, such as anti-bullying programs, had lower instances of the use of suspensions and expulsions. In contrast, the principals that favored strict, punitive approaches had higher rates of suspensions. While their study addressed preventive and exclusionary practices, the researchers did not consider how the perceptions of the principals would influence how the school resource officer would be utilized in the school environment.

SW-PBIS

School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports has its origin in the realm of exceptional children's programs in education. Originally researched and designed in response to supporting students with disabilities and challenging behaviors, SW-PBIS emerged with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997 (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Over the course of 25 years, SW-PBIS has transitioned into a research-based framework that supports all students using a carefully designed multi-tiered framework for support. Following the development, implementation, and evaluation of these social and behavioral support strategies, there are noticeable enhancements that have been made during its tenure, such as taking on a

culturally responsive lens and the integration of school mental health. Overall successes of sound implementation for schools demonstrate a significant reduction of office discipline referrals and improved school climate (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

By establishing a common understanding and framework to align expectations and balance the differences between cultures, many schools have implemented SW-PBIS. "The primary prevention of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) consists of rules, routines, and physical arrangements that are developed and taught by school staff to prevent initial occurrences of behavior the school would like to target for change" (PBIS.org, 2015, para. 3). The Tier 1 or Universal supports are designed for all students and are implemented school-wide. In addition to the teaching of school-wide expectations, schools develop a common language and practice for addressing behavior (expected and problem) and utilize data-based decision making.

In Tiers 2 and 3, the focus is still on sustaining the primary supports and then matching research-based interventions to the specific skill deficit identified with the problem behavior. These supports are targeted towards small groups or individual students. The science behind providing these supports posits that by teaching replacement behaviors that will obtain the desired results, the problem behaviors become less effective and efficient for getting needs met (Bradshaw, et. al., 2010).

The U. S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice co-authored a "Dear Colleague" guidance letter to the state departments of public instruction that explicitly outlined that schools are urged to adopt positive behavioral supports to reduce suspensions and monitor the disproportionate numbers of African American students' enrollments to suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). One

positive behavioral system that has gained national and international momentum for implementation is PBIS. Research has shown that implementing PBIS with fidelity has increased student achievement and reduced office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Horner et. al., 2009). However, the disparity in school discipline continues to present itself in the outcome data.

As previously cited, white students are most often suspended for clearly defined offenses such as vandalism. However, subjective behaviors can be misinterpreted, and that interpretation can change depending on a person's perspective for that day. PBIS can also help create a positive school climate that leads to increased student achievement, increased attendance rates for students and staff, and higher teacher effectiveness ratings.

It is also necessary to implement a framework in which students and teachers are able to handle problem behavior in a positive and proactive manner. PBIS is a "decision making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students" (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2013). Using data and a tiered system of support, teachers are able to identify students at risk for problem behavior, provide appropriate levels of support, and monitor their progress towards the desired outcome. The framework allows for consistency with definitions of problem behavior and transparency of consequences for classroom and office managed behaviors. Teachers use the model of "tell, model, practice, and assess" when teaching appropriate behaviors. Schools are also able to incorporate culturally responsive practices into their teaching of behavioral expectations which also enhances school engagement with parents and the community. If parents and the community feel

that they are valued and are a part of the school, then they are more likely to become actively engaged with the school and their child's education.

Disrespect varies from person to person, from culture to culture. With this solution, comes more in-depth, meaningful, on-going diversity training for educators. Developing a basic understanding of what may be considered disrespectful in one culture and not in the other assists in defining behaviors and eliminating the subjectivity. For example, in some Asian cultures it is disrespectful for children to look adults in the eyes. Without this type of understanding, uninformed teachers are more likely to punish students from other cultures for practices that are different than their own, for ways that might be reflective of how a child was raised. What a person interprets as disrespectful can also change depending on their well-being on any given day. Clearly clarifying the definitions of the types of offenses along with deeper cultural understanding may help to correct the issue (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Curtis et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2009).

Providing teachers with effective tools and strategies in dealing with student discipline and classroom management will be effective in maintaining a productive learning environment with minimal disruptions. For example, an effective classroom manager is a teacher who uses the Authoritative discipline approach._WebMD (n.d.) states, "The authoritative parent allows for flexibility and collaborative problem solving with the child when dealing with behavioral challenges. This is the most effective form of parenting" (para. 4). In contrast, an Authoritarian approach is too strict, similar to a drill sergeant or dictatorship in the "Do what I say and don't ask any questions" attitude, whereas the Permissive approach is just that—nonreactive—and allows for certain

undesirable behaviors. Students need and want to be disciplined in the proper manner. They need to know that there are boundaries and expectations for learning and conduct.

Having very specific guidelines as to what consequences are appropriate for certain actions can eliminate unnecessary referrals and suspensions for students. It is imperative that these guidelines are developed using a culturally responsive lens so as to avoid creating rigid guidelines that adhere to a White-only cultural norm. According to the data cited herein, Black students are most often suspended for their behavior, how they act, whereas white students are mostly suspended for concrete actions. The research shows that for white students to get suspended from the learning environment, there has to be no dispute, no room to wiggle, no way to plead. With Black students, there is a large gray area. There is plenty of room for interpretation and often, less room for due process.

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) was developed by Aydin Bal and he refined the original PBIS framework based on his research from cultural, psychology, and educational studies and sciences. Bal (2018) posited that PBIS was developed with a culture-neutral lens allowing for all groups to be supported within the framework. While implementers could consider cultural differences, there was not an intentionality to be culturally responsive. As PBIS framework was enhanced, there was a shift to a cultural deterministic approach which basically meant that there was now an intentionality around being culturally responsive.

CRPBIS encourages going one step further to actively seek the participation and involvement of a diverse group of stakeholders from within the school and community. When implementing a CRPBIS framework, attention is given to five layers of a school

culture: “Agency, School Culture, The School Culture, Cultures in the School, and Infrastructure” (Bal, 2018, p. 11). One key difference between PBIS and CRPBIS is the emphasis on affirming identification and culturally validating research-based practices. A school that focuses on creating an inclusive setting through culturally responsive systems and practices may have increase the likelihood of decreasing disproportionality.

Black males find themselves disproportionately suspended from class and school, and therefore they are missing out on important classroom instruction and ultimately, their education. Educational attainment (academic achievement and earning a high school diploma) becomes seriously impacted with suspensions. The connection that can be made is that increased suspension rates for African American males increases the likelihood of lower academic achievement for this subgroup. “In 2011, only 10% of black males in the US were proficient in Grade 8 reading as compared to 35% of white males. In fact, no state has NAEP Grade 8 reading proficiency levels for black males above Connecticut's 19%” (Dancy, 2014, p.482). The teaching and learning that occurs between students and teachers is removed from the educational attainment equation when students are suspended from school. These exclusionary practices ultimately deprive our students from their free and appropriate public education.

Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice is another initiative that has shown results in reducing the rates of suspension. This program focuses on teacher mediated conflict resolution held in large or small group sessions. The practice of suspension does not teach students how to better handle conflict in the future. “Because of the cultural and class differences between our students and our educational system, there’s a lot of conflict, [so] we have to build our

capacity to use other means to resolve those conflicts," states Barbara McClung, OUSD (as cited in Khadaroo, 2013, p.1). Our society mirrors the culture of our schools. If we want to create a more peaceful and inclusive society, we must first start within our schools, teaching, and modeling how to resolve conflict in a healthy way.

Restorative Justice is an alternative approach to suspensions that is slowly making its way onto the scene of school discipline. "Restorative practices are related to restorative justice, a way of looking at criminal justice that focuses on repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than on punishing offenders" (Mirsky, 2011, p. 46). Restorative Justice provides an opportunity for participants to build, restore, and maintain relationships in an effort to prevent future offenses from occurring (Carroll, 2008; Davidson, 2014). Gonzalez (2012) noted school districts across the nation in states such as California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Oregon, and Virginia have begun implementing a three-tiered approach to restorative practices and have seen reductions in suspensions and expulsions.

As a core instructional practice, restorative classroom circles serve as a preventative measure that mitigate conflict between students. A "circle allows educators to intentionally organize their classrooms in ways where students get to define themselves before someone else does" (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014, p. 30). In restorative circles, teachers and students have the opportunity to get to know each other as individuals, celebrating unique differences with biases and assumptions cast aside. Not only are student voices heard, but students are "seen." Rocque and Paternoster (2011) purported "Psychological research has indicated that youths are likely to disengage from school and academic pursuits if they perceive negative information about themselves or

their racial group within the school environment" (p. 636). Developing trust and respect in and of each other and the circle is crucial before participants could engage in positive conversation about social injustices that they themselves may have experienced.

Restorative Conferencing focuses on specific instances where harm has occurred in order to resolve the issue and repair the harm. Within a restorative conference, there are key participants such as the victim, the offender, and a facilitator, and additional participants may include community members, parents, and supporters for the victim and offender (Holtham, 2009; Wachtel et al., 2010). Within an MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) in a school setting, restorative conferencing may be used as a supplemental or intensive support for small groups or individual students in lieu of receiving the traditional office discipline referral. Instead, the participants in the conference would create an agreement or contract that would hold all accountable to the agreed upon steps to repair the harm.

Winn (2018) shared this definition: "A circle is a versatile restorative practice that can be used proactively, to develop relationships and build community, or reactively, to respond to wrongdoing, conflicts, and opportunities" (p. 93). However, she suggested that restorative justice should open the door for participants to begin the work of dismantling social injustices and racial inequities. A paradigm shift is required for this work using a pedagogical stance of history matters, language matters, race matters, and justice matters. Restorative justice in education gives participants agency and voice, strengthening relationships that will create community and a sense of belonging.

A critical restorative justice circle provides the opportunity to tackle social inequalities such as racism and homophobia "through deep conversation and cultural

flexibility by teaching students to hear multiple viewpoints and hold their reactions until they receive the talking piece" (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014, p. 25). One goal for critical restorative justice circles is to teach students to think critically, question thoughtfully, and advocate for what is just. All students deserve equity and fairness; they deserve justice. Through critical restorative justice circles, we can change the way we foster positive relationships by educating and removing the barriers of bias and assumptions so that our students will begin to shift the status quo and create a socially just world.

While the data show gains in overall discipline data and academic achievement with implementing restorative practices, the studies did not report a decrease with disproportionality in the discipline data (Gonzalez, 2012; Mirsky, 2011; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). The conclusion can be drawn that Restorative Practices alone will not address the disproportionate rates by which our minoritized students are being suspended.

Principal Perspectives on Discipline

While race, poverty, and gender have been considered consistent predictors for rates of suspension, school context and principal perspectives on discipline appear to play a significant role as well (Skiba et al., 2014). The school principal is responsible for setting the tone for the culture and climate of a school. The school culture speaks to the expectations and how things are done, and the climate is how the school "feels" or how the stakeholders feel about the school. Positive school climate is associated with lower suspension rates (Heilbrun et al., 2015).

Bickel and Qualls (1980) shared their findings that supported the claim that a positive school climate is present in a school with low suspension rates, and as such, the converse of that was also evident. The principals' actions and words directly

correlated to having a positive or negative school climate. In a school with a positive climate and low suspension rates, the principal was visible and positively interacted with staff and students. When comparing schools that had low and high suspension rates, it was evident that the "administrators differed significantly in their approaches to communication, management, decision making, and leadership style" (Bickel & Qualls, 1980, p. 85). In the schools with a negative school climate, it was also observed that punitive approaches were used to control student behavior, which resulted in higher suspension rates. It stands to reason, then, that implementing programs alone may not be the most effective method to reducing suspensions and that effort should also be spent on fostering positive relationships to support a positive school climate.

Knowing that the role of a principal is key in creating a positive school climate which positively influences suspension rates and student achievement, it is imperative that a principal design the systems and practices in a school to support what they believe to be important. Davis and Jordan (1994) posited that if the school context and structures place emphasis on student discipline, student achievement will decrease. As previously discussed, the more time a student spends out of the classroom due to exclusionary consequences, the access to learning diminishes. The principal's philosophy on school discipline influences what structures and practices are put into place. If a principal believes in the frequent use of punitive consequences to deter inappropriate behavior, the systems they will design will sustain those practices. In a study conducted by Raffaele Mendez and Knoff (2003), they found that principals with differing philosophies on student behavior management could maintain the same codes of conduct and yield quite different results. A principal who believes in using zero-tolerance policies had high

suspension rates and the principal that emphasized prevention and intervention strategies saw low rates of suspension. This demonstrates how a context of a school can influence suspension rates with student behavior being only one facet of the school context (Raffaele et al., 2002).

A principal's philosophies underpin their leadership style, which in turn determines the systems and practices that are put into place. One study of Indiana's principals found just that. Skiba and Edl (2004) conducted an analysis of school disciplinary practices based on the perspectives of principals. Results identified that two-thirds of the principals took a preventative approach and were more likely to implement a variety of supports and less likely to suspend students. The remaining one third of principals supported punitive approaches such as suspension and expulsion to maintain order. The researchers concluded that while student behaviors may influence disciplinary outcomes, the use of severe exclusionary practices was "to some extent a choice made by individual educators, based on their own attitudes concerning the purpose and function of the disciplinary process" (Skiba & Edl, 2004, p. 4). The nature of these systems and practices creates the school context in which lives the culture and climate of a school. Therefore, a principal must understand the saliency of creating a positive school culture and climate when implementing systems and practices if the goal is to reduce suspensions and increase student achievement.

Disparities in school discipline outcomes continue to pervade the nation's public schools since first reported in 1975. Efforts to reduce the disproportionality are noted throughout the literature and include the implementation of SW-PBIS, CR-PBIS, Restorative Practices, Restorative Justice, and the elimination of zero-tolerance policies

and less involvement by school resource officers with school-based offenses. A principal's philosophy and perspectives on school discipline are at the crux of establishing the climate and culture of a school and they determine whether a preventative or reactive/punitive approach will be taken towards school discipline. Very little shows up in the literature about how the race or gender of a principal impacts how or which approach is taken, much less how the race and gender influence a principal's perceptions and beliefs with regards to school discipline. My study seeks not only to build upon existing research but to fill the hole in the literature with my introspective look at how my race and gender underpin my philosophy and perceptions of taking a preventative approach to school discipline using a blended model of SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices.

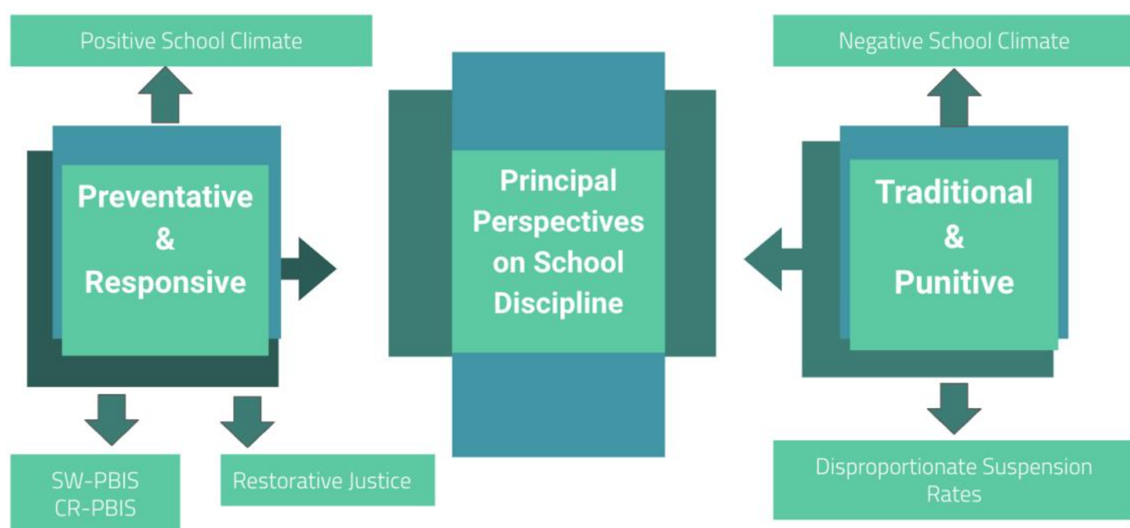

Figure 4. Principal Perspectives on School Discipline. This figure illustrates the relevant literature that addresses the competing principal perspectives.

SW-PBIS and restorative practices are in alignment with an MTSS framework and where one approach falls short, the other fills in, creating a comprehensive and balanced approach to school discipline. Core instructional practices can be identified as Tier 1, instruction that all students receive. Academic core instruction teaches the state standards using evidence-based instructional models to all students. Core behavior practices, as defined in SW-PBIS, include defining and setting core expectations for all students. Tier 1 of restorative practices focuses on community building circles in all classrooms for all students. Tier 2 practices provide supplemental supports for some students, for example: social skills groups, reading / math interventions, and restorative conferencing. Tier 3 practices provide intensive supports to individual students such as individualized behavior and academic plans, and additional restorative conferencing in combination with other interventions. While SW-PBIS focuses on teaching behavioral expectations just as one would teach academics, restorative practices focus on the relational piece—fostering and sustaining positive relationships. The lack of research on implementing both approaches together is the specific gap I intended to explore during my study through intentional data collection and analysis using an autoethnographic methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will provide an overview of the methodology that was used in this qualitative research study. The overview will provide a description of the research design, the research site and participant, researcher positionality, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations and trustworthiness, and limitations of the study. As previously discussed, there have been many approaches taken to reduce the disproportionate rates that African American students are being suspended compared to their white counterparts. However, there has been limited research that explores the effects of the combination of approaches and even less conducted from the perspective of white female school administrators.

My voice is important. My story is worth sharing. The courage it takes to say that out loud should not be underestimated. Throughout my administrative career, I have felt the pressure to vie for the limelight, strive to be the best, overtly or subtly, but always seek approval or favor. Speak up or stay quiet. Risk being ostracized for saying too much or ride on the coattails of others. I have traveled on both paths and what I have come to realize is that finding my voice in a sea of the male dominated, "good ole boy" network of school administrators, locally and nationally, will not only be cathartic, but contribute to the research and support for other white female principals that may consider or already be on the same path.

My whiteness is my security blanket. Where I sometimes do not consider myself a part of the "network," I cling to my security blanket because that affords me a space to belong, where it is safe to take leadership risks, knowing I will be caught before I fall too far. This is privilege. My race will not hinder my progress or will it? While I take false

pride in going rogue with my initiatives, I know deep down that my race and gender have a significant impact on my story and the outcomes yet to be realized.

The timeliness of my study could not be more appropriate with the increased social unrest between Black and white people—politically, economically, educationally, and socially. The Black Lives Matter movement has taken center stage, guaranteeing voices are finally being heard, the injustices finally being seen. Some have chosen to become allies while others have chosen to oppose, ignore, and suppress. My study was not an easy one to conduct. I wanted to be a co-conspirator and not an ally. While I cannot change my race, I needed to be able to avoid centering my whiteness amidst struggle against social injustices, racism, and oppression (Love, 2019). As I leaned into my own discomfort during this study, I feared my security blanket will be exposed for what it truly is and therefore that perceived safety net may not continue to exist.

This autoethnographic study was purposeful in seeking to fill the gap in the research by using this research design to answer the following questions:

1. How has implementing restorative practices and PBIS simultaneously within a diverse, Title 1 urban-like school helped to shape my beliefs as a white, female principal?
2. As a white, female principal, what are my perceptions of the staff response to a blended model of SW-PBIS and restorative practices?
3. How do I, as a white, female principal, contribute to the environment that produces discipline disparities? How do I combat it?

Design

Initially, I considered using a case study design to explore how the dual implementation of PBIS and Restorative Justice could affect the disproportionate suspension rates of African American students in another school, but that approach did not ignite a passion within me. Students are so much more than mere participants in a world of data and research that I have explored. Their stories matter. Ethnography, as a research design method, delves deep into telling the story of a culture-sharing group that is being studied (Creswell, 2013). While this approach tempted me, I came to realize that at the heart of this study was the role that my race and gender play in the experiences as a principal implementing both of these approaches.

My story matters, which was unique unto itself and that is a significant contribution to the current literature. Autoethnography is one qualitative research design method that requires the researcher to be the observer of the researcher, seeking to explore and understand a self-lived experience or phenomena. “Rhetoric and method are inextricably linked in autoethnography, because the method itself ultimately requires rhetorical expression in reporting” (McIlveen, 2008, p. 15).

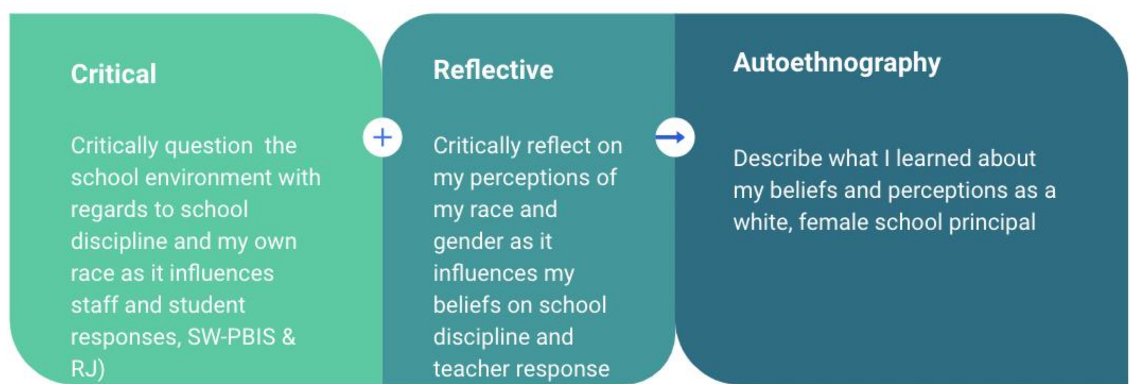

Figure 5. Autoethnography. This figure illustrates how using Autoethnography as my research design supports the success of this study.

Documenting my stories and retelling them through using critical reflexive practice removes the bias and my choice to view something in a way that it is not. Critical reflexive practice forces me to shed my veil of self-preservation and place my naked vulnerability on the stage for everyone, including myself, to view. Autoethnography provides a way for me to share my data and do it in a way where my voice, tone, and word choice support and tell my story. After further reflection, it became clear that an autoethnographic research design was the optimal choice for this study.

Context of Study

This research study took place at Wilson Elementary School, which is also designated as a Low-Performing School in a southern state. Wilson Elementary School had developed a reputation of being a tough school to work and learn. Statistics and data that are reported on the state websites painted a picture of unruly students and incompetent adults. Tension exuded from the walls and yelling was the main form of

communication within the classrooms. However, the tide began to turn when the staff began focusing on building positive relationships and common, proactive disciplinary practices.

Wilson Elementary is a large, urban-like school with approximately 750 students that are demographically represented by 40% White, 40% African American, and 30% Hispanic students. The demographics of the staff are approximately 97% White, 2% Hispanic, 1% African American. Approximately 60 - 70% of the students are eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch and therefore the school receives Title 1 funding. Additionally, the school has been designated as a recurring Low-Performing School and is operating under the Restart Reform Model, which allows for charter school-like flexibility with human resources, finance, assessment, and school calendar. This enables the principal to adopt innovative strategies that will increase student achievement.

This study was conducted one year into a world-wide pandemic. Stress was added to families as they coped and adjusted to lost jobs, limited interactions with people, taking care of those who were sick, and scarce resources such as food, paper products, and cleaning supplies. Schools were closed and students attended school virtually from their homes and daycares. The structures and routines typical of a classroom that did not exist with integrity in the virtual classrooms. Students did not have the opportunity to interact with each other and develop socially. When this study began, students were returning to school after a long hiatus of remote learning. Kindergarten students had never set foot in the school building until March 2021. The pandemic had a huge impact on student behavior as we transitioned back to in-person learning. It is important to note that this study was not conducted during "normal" times.

Focal Participant

As the autoethnographer, I am the participant. I am a white female school principal who has been in education for 25 years, 18 of which have been in the role of an administrator. I have served as this school's principal for three and a half years at the time of this study. I am a constructivist at heart. I constantly interpret my surroundings and experiences to build understanding of my world and apply it to the world around me. Analyzing and reflecting upon every interaction and reaction, trying to capture the essence of what it is that predicts and influences the outcomes, sometimes I overthink situations. I am the one that sits back and listens, rarely taking center stage with my group of colleagues.

I am white and I am female. The crevice between self-confidence and deep insecurities is a slippery slope and I find myself holding on to the rope of my experiences and knowledge. As a female leader, I am not domineering nor weak, but I often wonder if I was louder, more forceful, and overtly in control (comparable to those stereotypical qualities of a male leader), would I be able to make more of a difference, or make faster progress, in transforming our school? I see myself as a compassionate leader, one who leads with empathy, patience, and grace. How will my identity as a female impact my day-to-day interactions as a school leader? I am confident that leading by example with these milder and supportive characteristics will help shape how the adults in the building treat each other. I am insecure because I am not a male principal, as I have this unfounded belief that female teachers respond more favorably to male leadership. I am insecure that I am not considered a strong leader by my colleagues because I do remain quieter.

My whiteness affords the confidence that I feel in taking risks with a staff that is primarily white. My perception is that my social equity agenda is more palatable for my white staff members because I am white. I wonder if I was an African American female would the perception be that my social equity agenda is due to my race and therefore taken less seriously? It is a slippery slope indeed. I do not waver in my beliefs, as it relates to school discipline, but I will have to reconcile my confidence with my insecurities.

Data Collection and Procedures

Balancing the personal and the scholarly is a challenging task for me, the researcher, as I grapple with my indoctrinated beliefs on what constitutes "real research." Narrative research by nature invites storytelling and can be subjective as the researcher interprets or constructs knowledge of a social phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It was vital to the credibility of this study that I focused on the appropriateness of the data collection methods and the adequacy or amount of the data that is collected (LeRoux, 2017). Knowing that one single data set should not be used exclusively to inform research, I chose five methods with which to collect data: note booking, journaling, archival data, field notes / analytic memo, and the use of rich, thick description. The data from each method was used to support or discount my claims, which added to the richness of my findings. For example, in my journal I wrote "I feel like our discipline data keeps going down" and when I compared it to the actual archival data, it was showing an increase. I recorded my thinking about that contradiction in my analytic memo which said, "How can that be? I swear I thought things were going in the right direction. I need to spend time reflecting on this discrepancy in my journal this week." My analytic memos also

included the notes I made as ideas for themes popped into my head. In the previous example, one note I wrote was “denial”, thinking that could be a theme. Triangulating the data from these sources allowed me to compare, double check and analyze the new information holistically to gain deeper insight and form new understandings.

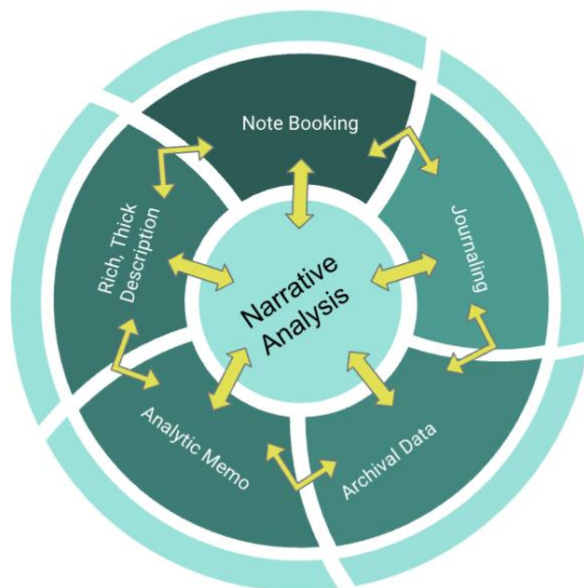

Figure 6. Data Collection Procedures. This figure illustrates the methods that were used for data collection in this study and how they are separate and intertwined at the same time.

The timeframe for the data collection was April – May, 2021.

Note booking

It is essential to my study that I kept a daily notebook and recorded my interactions, observations, feelings, questions, thoughts, and connections to past experiences and memories. This raw data was captured in my notes and included copies of emails that I sent and/or received, material that I read, and content of meetings that I attended. Throughout and at the conclusion of each workday, I objectively documented

the salient events and communications that were relevant to my study to maintain the integrity of the information. I highlighted and made notes of key areas upon which I wanted to reflect in my journal using questions to guide that work: Where did I perceive the concept of race to show up in the interactions? How or where do my preconceived notions of teacher beliefs show up? In which instances did I feel strong emotions? In which instances did I say or not say something for fear of being confrontational regarding race and school discipline? Were there instances that I felt that my racial identity influenced my thoughts or actions? Synthesizing these daily entries at the end of the day was the entry point for my reflections that I recorded in my journal.

Journaling

As the autoethnographer, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the duration of the study that included my own self-reflections on how I chose and continue to choose to support the implementation process, my perceptions of the school climate and how my perceptions of willingness of staff (or lack thereof) to shift their beliefs from a punitive model to a restorative model of school discipline. Most importantly, I reflected upon my identities of being female, white, and a school principal. At the conclusion of each week, I reviewed the entries and documents in my notebook in a quiet space and absorbed the thoughts, emotions, and feelings that I experienced during that time. Allowing the time to process, feel, make connections, and ask myself more questions were my pre-writing activities. From that point, I conducted timed writings with the duration of at least two hours where my thoughts flowed uninterrupted by my own self or others. My journaling was completed all at once and over two sessions, which afforded some flexibility during

the writing process. Eight journal entries, one each week, were recorded over the duration of this study.

Archival Data

Public, archival data sets were collected and served as another data source upon which to reflect and compare and contrast my own thinking. These public, archival data sets included school discipline data (office referrals, suspensions) and staff perception surveys (school/district created, the state Teacher Working Conditions Survey results). Prior to collecting my daily raw data, I recorded my initial reflections about this data in journal entries. The purpose of this was to provide an understanding and context to my thinking prior to starting this self-reflective journey. These initial reflections also prompted additional journaling or connections throughout the duration of my study.

Analytic Memo

Using an analytic memo (Saldaña, 2016) approach to maintaining my field notes allowed me to reflect upon my choices, processes, and procedures, demonstrating a careful and thoughtful approach to the methodological steps, especially during coding, of my study. My analytic memos captured additional data on my thoughts, questions, and reminders to reflect on certain data. Rather than wait until the conclusion of my data collection to code my journal entries, I also used analytic memos to record the evolution of my coding from bracketing or highlighting the raw data to preliminary codes and to the final codes. In my notes, I recorded and reflected upon operational definitions of my codes and documented any patterns or themes that I saw developing. Additionally, these notes provided an audit trail of the process used in my study.

Rich, Thick Description

This strategy of writing tapped into the multitude of feelings associated with our senses which gave credence to the evocative autoethnography (LeRoux, 2017). The intentional use of rich, thick description transported the reader into my experiences where they not only could visualize but hear and feel the context and content of the data. Thus, by doing so, a connection could be made between the reader and researcher, and hopefully inspired the reader to begin this journey of their own.

Data Analysis

Narrative Analysis was the anchor to my study. "This method offers researchers a window into how individuals' stories are shaped by the categories they inhabit, such as gender, race, class, and sexual identity, and it preserves the voice of the individual through a close textual analysis of their storytelling (Josselson, R. & Hammack, P., 2021, n.p.). In my case, as an autoethnographer, I used a critical lens through which to view my voice and stories and became aware of even the slightest nuances of my word choice (toggled between informal and academic vocabulary) and penmanship ("shouty caps"). As I immersed myself in the stories of the data collected, I was able to use a thematic analysis approach which allowed me to authentically identify specific themes as they emerged during my interpretation of the data (Riessman, 2008). By not predetermining the codes and themes, I was able to reduce the likelihood of my own biases and presumptions, thus increasing the level of objectivity during data analysis.

Triangulating the data sets provided a valid method to counter the Halo Effect during my study. The Halo Effect is a cognitive bias where my impressions of staff and situations could influence my perceptions of them. Edward Thorndike (1920) conducted a

study entitled, *The Constant Error in Psychological Ratings*, where he measured how the impressions that commanding officers had of their soldiers influenced their perceptions on the different character traits possessed by the soldiers. By comparing and contrasting my thoughts and perceptions against the hard data sets, I was able to analyze the data objectively and reduce the likelihood of having a Halo Effect.

Coding

The intentional selection of coding method(s) ensured alignment to my research questions (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout my data collection process, I conducted pre-coding work to highlight words and phrases that stood out to me. I maintained a code book to track emerging codes, their descriptions, and examples. Knowing that my initial selections of coding methods may need to change, I remained open minded yet analytical in my field notes to ensure that my coding method selection remained the most appropriate for the content and purpose of my research.

During the first cycle of coding, I employed the elemental method of In Vivo coding with my journal entries. In Vivo coding illuminates the voice of the participant and generates codes using the actual language of the participant. Because my study centers around my voice, In Vivo coding was a natural choice for the first cycle (Saldaña, 2016).

Prior to initiating my second cycle of coding, I believed some transitional work was necessary in order to visualize the categories that could surface. In order to do this, I utilized the common tool of a Wordle graphic that depicted the frequency of words that surfaced during the In Vivo coding. Second cycle coding is a means by which to bring clarity to the body of data and organize it. My second cycle coding method used a

focused coding strategy as a means to identify the categories from which themes and realizations were derived (Saldaña, 2016). I anticipated that these methods would be most appropriate to this autoethnographic study.

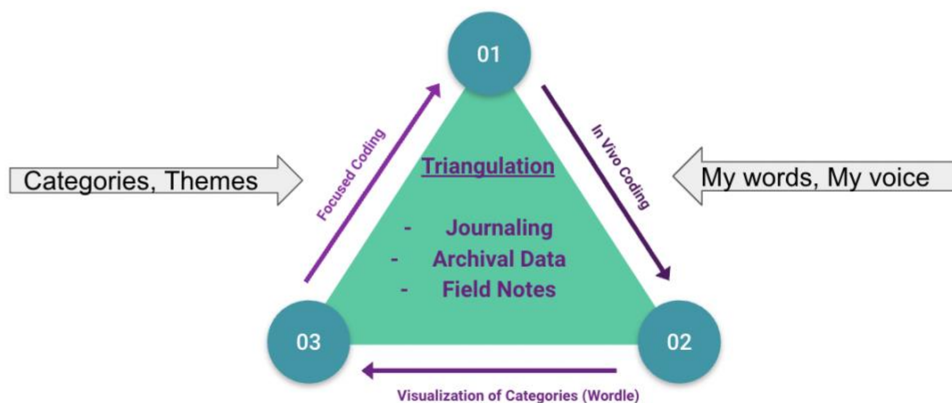

Figure 6. Data Analysis. This figure illustrates the methods that were used for data analysis in this study.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction of the school district where Wilson Elementary School is located. The identity of the school system and school was kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used during data collection and reporting of the results of the study. One challenge that was addressed prior to conducting the study, was how to report the name of the autoethnographer, because a public record search of the researcher could identify the school system and/or school. Another challenge to the anonymity of this study was to reconcile referencing the archival data sets of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, as that data are linked directly to the true name of the school and district. IRB approval was obtained before the commencement of this study.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Le Roux (2017) provided insight into the complexity of autoethnographic research and discussed the various positions taken on how to assess the rigor and the trustworthiness of this type of qualitative research. Researchers disagree on one definitive set of criteria by which to measure autoethnography, but Le Roux (2017) posited that researchers should utilize criteria that aligns with the study's purpose.

Two genres of autoethnography can be visualized on a continuum, with the evocative on one end and the analytical on the other. A researcher should first determine where on the continuum the purpose of their study lies before identifying which criteria will be used to measure the rigor and trustworthiness of their study.

Evocative autoethnography is designed to evoke emotions and allow the reader to connect and resonate with the research by using rich, thick description of their personal experiences to tell the stories. In contrast, analytical autoethnography relies on empirical data and specific procedures for data collection, interpretation, and analysis that is couched in personal experience and reflexivity. The purpose of my study lands somewhere in the middle between the two genres. Hence, the criteria that I have selected to measure the trustworthiness of my study align with those proposed by Le Roux (2017): subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility, and contribution (p. 204).

Several strategies were employed to support the aforementioned criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. The very nature of autoethnography addresses subjectivity, as my in-depth and detailed journal entries and field notes position myself for critical self-reflection. I, as the researcher, included an in-depth reflexive or positionality statement that not only addresses the authoritative and supervisory role that I

hold at the site of the study, but a close and honest examination of my own experiences, beliefs, and biases that impacted my perceptions and decisions during the data collection timeframe and with analyzing the data. Triangulation of the raw data and reflections of journal entries and archival data sets served to underpin the connections made during the coding processes. Including rich, thick description from my reflections throughout my study will hopefully engage readers and allow them to connect their feelings and emotions to my experiences in this study. An intentional emphasis was placed on transparency and honesty throughout the study to foster credibility and trustworthiness. Finally, this study has contributed to the body of knowledge and possibly empowered other administrators to take the risk of self-reflection using a social justice lens. Until one can have these conversations with oneself, they cannot effectively have them with others.

The selected methodology was most appropriate for my study. The process and culminating findings proved to be worthwhile and significant to myself as a white, female school principal.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The emotions and thoughts that coursed through me and into my reflections moved me beyond my wildest expectations. The rawness of my self-reflections told a story of intense passion, frustration, insecurity, and at times, even self-loathing. I liken the process of my data collection to journaling therapy. My reflections start broad and idealistic and yet, quickly narrow to my innermost beliefs and my response to those beliefs, while writing on autopilot. These reflections continued to stir up intense emotions within me and I found it difficult to step away from the emotion and memories to take an analytical view from an outsider perspective. It was like looking back through a window or binoculars when I re-read my reflections later. It was me and now, it's me watching me. At times, I was taken aback, asking myself "Did I really think that?" or "Is that how others perceive me?" I have reached a new level of vulnerability with myself as I analyzed my data.

Utilizing In Vivo coding method, I was able to identify key words and phrases that represented my emotions, thoughts, actions, and responses throughout the data collection. Categorizing these key words and phrases provided the opportunity to for me to encompass my whole self in the data analysis. Synthesizing the data was challenging in that there was a wide range of emotions, thoughts, actions and responses throughout my journal entries. The transitional coding strategy of creating a word cloud graphic enabled me to view myself from an outsider's perspective, illuminating repetitive words and phrases that indicated who I am as a leader and my experiences during the data collection period.

Figure 8. Word Cloud Graphic. This figure illustrates the prominent words extracted from InVivo coding data samples.

This information guided the direction of the second cycle coding using the selective coding method. With this method, central categories are created to organize and connect the codes from analysis that will highlight what is at the heart of the research. Four core categories coalesced from the selective coding cycle: 1) Pollyanna Principal 2) Zero Tolerance for Zero-Tolerance 3) Deficit Mindset and 4) White Savior. There were some instances where the same incident from my reflections supported two different themes, yet I felt strongly that the themes could not be combined into one. The remainder of this chapter discusses each theme separately prior to demonstrating how each theme is used to answer the research questions. This format provides the opportunity to become immersed in the content and build a common understanding of the themes from my perspective. This understanding becomes the foundation for which the research questions are answered.

Theme 1: A Pollyanna Principal

I initially termed this theme as "A Pollyanna Principal" because of the many examples I had of wearing rose-colored glasses to view the progress we were making with implementing SW-PBIS and Restorative Practices. At our staff meetings and in my daily interactions, I would make it a point to celebrate how "good things were going" and how much of a positive impact I saw that we were making. A quick search of the definition of the *Pollyanna Principle* led me to the understanding that the Pollyanna Principle, in short, describes a positivity bias whereas a person may view or recall information that is positive rather than focus on the negative aspects (Ackerman, 2021).

With further analysis, I discovered that there were three chronological stages of evidence that I was or am a "Pollyanna Principal".

Figure 9. Theme 1. A Pollyanna Principal. This figure illustrates a sample of the words and phrases extracted from coding.

Knee deep in my doctoral program, I became a principal. Starting in February, I could not wait to begin sharing what I learned and believed to be true with my new

school family. Reflecting on my early communications, I realized that I believed that everyone would support my "great ideas" with excitement and enthusiasm. Assuming that everyone shared the same mindset with me, I jumped right in donning my rose-colored glasses. I treated staff meetings as professional development sessions and as I recall those meetings, everyone was engaged and participated.

On one particular afternoon, I was feeling excited and well prepared for the staff meeting that day. Pushing the school's donated shopping cart full of supplies, I headed to the media center. As I entered, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to calm my inner excitement. Dressed as a business woman or news anchor, I had on this bright pink jacket coupled with black pants and shiny black high heeled shoes. I carefully set out materials at each table such as chart paper and markers. Those were for the small group brainstorming activity prior to the big finale for the staff meeting. I mingled around, talking to different staff as they entered in. They had puzzled expressions and inquired as to what we were doing. I smiled and answered vaguely, "you'll see".

The activity consisted of small groups brainstorming the characteristics of their "dream school" and then we created one chart that captured all of their ideas. "This, I said, will guide us in our school improvement planning and we will have our dream school." A newer teacher told one of the assistant principals, "I want to be her someday." He shared that with me after the meeting and I was on cloud nine! I was feeling quite successful in that moment. I continued to wear the rose colored glasses to every staff meeting, never taking them off to view any discord.

I continued to carefully share research articles that I read as "news you can use" again assuming everyone was just as excited as I was to read and learn. "Leading change

will be awesome!" I specifically recall telling this to my former colleagues, as I shared how I was going to apply my training in SW-PBIS to working in my new role. As this new Pollyanna Principal, I believed that leading change would be met with unequivocal support and excitement, and I chose to only see that come to fruition. In addition to SW-PBIS, I was also learning and researching restorative practices in my coursework. "Why wouldn't everyone be on board with also implementing restorative practices too?", I thought. I chose only to see the positive reactions and ignored the skeptical undercurrent and resistant front from those that maintained a punitive mindset with regards to school discipline.

Focusing only on the positive impact that I believed we were experiencing, I shouted that from the mountain tops. In data presentations to the superintendent and cabinet members, I shared graphs that indicated a steady decline in office referrals. how the climate of the school had begun shifting to being more positive. I touted that students were happier and felt more connected to the school. These rose-colored glasses were great! In one conversation with an assistant principal, I was pointing out how well things were going, referring to student discipline. He replied that "teachers are struggling to manage student behaviors" and that they were feeling like "they keep trying but circles are not working, that they keep talking about it [improving behaviors], I bragged how the climate of the school had begun shifting to being more positive. I touted that students were happier and felt more connected to the school. These rose-colored glasses were great! In one conversation with an assistant principal, I was pointing out how well things were going, referring to student discipline. He replied that "teachers are struggling to manage student behaviors" and that they were feeling like "they keep trying but circles

are not working, that they keep talking about it [improving behaviors], but nothing is changing". Without hesitation, I responded back that "it's most likely due to one or two children that the teacher is struggling with but overall, student behavior is improving."

As I reflected on this conversation, it was obvious to me that I chose not to view the situation as negative, but only focused on the positive. In fact, I "flat out ignored" the negative as if it was not even real. With further reflection, those rose-colored glasses were a self-preservation tactic that I used. I not only chose to see the positive in the situation, but I chose to view myself as one who was doing the right things, the right way and was achieving positive results. This becomes a salient thought, as I used it when I viewed myself throughout this research project.

Theme 2: Zero Tolerance for Zero-Tolerance

Throughout my reflections, this notion continued to surface and evoke strong emotions within me no matter how many times I read my data. I realized that not only did I not support zero-tolerance policies in my work and when communicating my beliefs, but I also found myself having zero tolerance for those that wanted zero-tolerance policies in the school. In a conversation with a teacher about a specific student, a barrage of questions came at me full force. In complete exasperation, she asked, "What ever happened to a zero-tolerance policy? Where do you draw the line? When can students not be allowed to come to school?" I could feel my eyes bulge and my jaw drop. I struggled not to show my shock and disbelief with my facial expressions. I took a deep breath and fiercely gripped the laptop I was carrying. We were discussing her student drawing a picture that depicted himself cutting another student with a knife. I paused a moment to regroup, process, and ensure my tone and expression was still that of support. In

retrospect, I also felt like she was passive aggressively challenging my leadership and philosophy of student discipline.

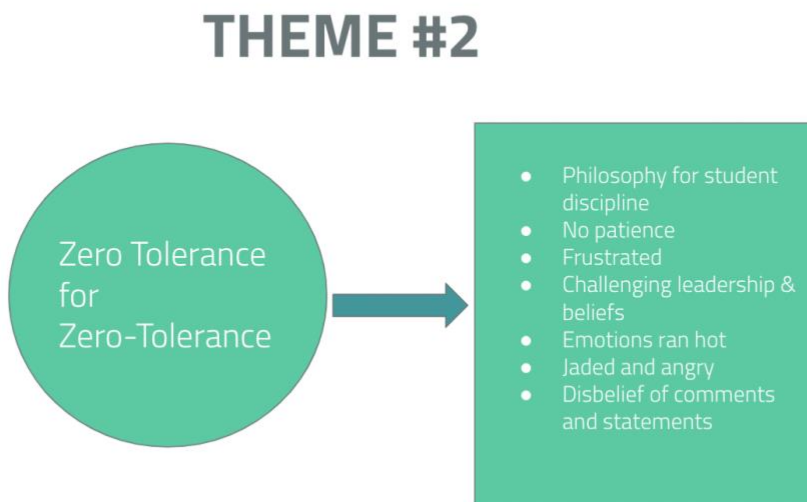

Figure 10. Theme 2. Zero Tolerance for Zero-Tolerance. This figure illustrates a sample of the words and phrases extracted from coding.

The outrage and frustration that I still feel when I recall that conversation all but consumes me. At that moment, I wanted to shout that "the child was only six years old" and that this was more of a "cry for help than a suspendable offense". I wanted to begin spewing research and statistics back at her to prove to her that zero-tolerance policies did more harm than good. But at that moment, I did not. I gave a short answer, that "I look at each situation individually and zero-tolerance policies would only be considered in cases with drugs or weapons". We were the middle of the hallway. I would not be able to maintain my composure if I went down that road at that moment. I could not see past her zero-tolerance mindset to even comprehend the magnitude of the conversation. I could feel my cheeks reddening with anger as I lost rationale thought. The teacher was white.

The other student was white. I am white. The "offending" student was Black. I never thought to refer to our SW-PBIS matrix and our agreed upon procedures.

This instance in isolation would not result in an office referral, however, because this was an ongoing issue between the two boys, it certainly could have. Yet, that office referral would not warrant a suspension or expulsion, according to our flowchart, but definitely a consequence which would most likely be punitive in nature. Did you catch that? Did you just make the same connection that I did? Our SW-PBIS system and practices just upheld the very thing I am trying to prevent: the Black child would receive an office referral resulting in a punitive consequence which sets him on that trajectory to be suspended. While I did not jump on the suspension / expulsion train immediately, I definitely made it to the platform.

To contrast that situation, another white staff member had been supporting an older, white student due to significant traumatic experiences he had. This student would lash out, hit, cuss, and threaten other students daily. This staff member advocated for support for this student and not necessarily negative disciplinary consequences. She rallied the teachers and support staff, offering to teach them some strategies to help them support the student during his outbursts. She asked me for leniency on disciplinary actions. Not in the same breath, but during the same timeframe with a different situation, this staff member advocated for the exact opposite, wanting a younger student to be placed in an alternative setting until he could behave. This student would tantrum with the best of them, knock over desks and kick chairs. He would scream and lunge at the other five-year-olds, scaring them into tears. This staff member could not believe that I would not just send this younger student away, clarifying for me that "the teacher still has

eighteen other students to still teach". My cheeks reddened again and I noticed myself taking another deep breath. This younger student was Black.

Numerous situations occurred during the four weeks of data collection where a staff member boldly stated that she did not want that student back in her class, wanted a student suspended or moved [classrooms] after a specific incident occurred. After each time, my emotions ran hot—zero tolerance for the zero-tolerance mindset. In my reflections, I wrote:

> She doesn't get that she's the reason and how can she be so dismissive of a student? I am at a loss for words. [This staff member] is a support for students. Does she realize how she sounds right now? How can she be selective of who should get help and who should get punished? This breaks my heart.

None of the five major incidents involved drugs or weapons. Four out of the five instances involved a white staff member and a Black student. I cannot ignore these disparities. I am jaded and angry.

I am quick to identify what I perceive to be racial bias with the staff members. I reflect on the antecedent and the actual incident and yet, I neglect to reflect on my actions or non-actions that immediately occur right after. Why is that? I have to remove my rose-colored glasses and take a hard look at myself. I did not suspend the Black boy who drew the picture, nor did I have a follow up discussion with the teacher. I told myself I would debrief with the support person once I calmed down, but I never did. While my emotions and thoughts had zero tolerance for zero-tolerance, my actions did not. Fear prevented me from taking action. Fear of making a situation worse. Fear of causing conflict. Fear of not being the Pollyanna Principal. It appeared to me that maybe I also had a deficit mindset towards myself and not just the staff members.

Theme 3: Deficit Mindsets

A deficit mindset holds the belief that a subject is not capable of meeting an expectation. For example, in education, this can be identified when a teacher holds a low expectation of achievement with a student of color that is demonstrated by giving that student only easy questions to answer. I can infer from our discipline data sets those similar low expectations are held for students of color and meeting behavioral expectations, either by over-accommodating teacher responses to misbehavior or in requesting that students be suspended immediately.

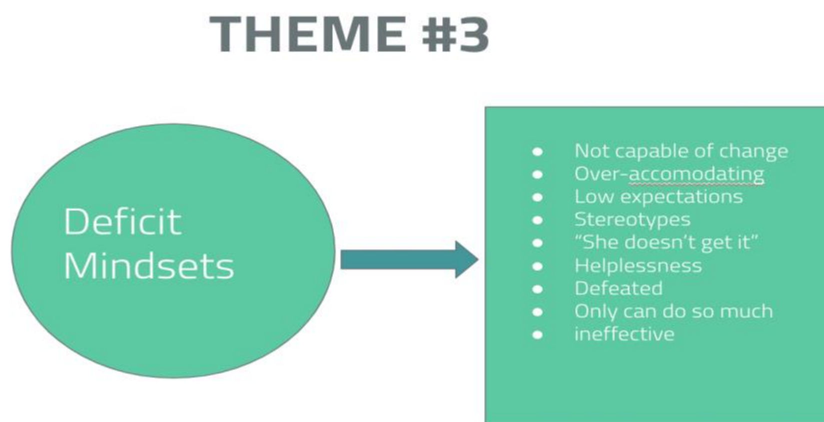

Figure 11. Theme 3. Deficit Mindsets. This figure illustrates a sample of the words and phrases extracted from coding.

Exploring my data sets, I found that I was questioning whether teachers were capable of changing their mindsets, or in reality, if I was capable of changing their mindsets. In some instances, I wrote that I did not believe it was possible. "She's never going to change" and "She just doesn't get it" are two examples that support that I have a deficit mindset towards particular staff members. I recall one incident where a teacher

was trying her best to connect with a student who presented challenging behaviors and became upset when she felt she didn't make progress.

Teacher: "I know he lives at the Children's Home and I try to give him space. He has had a tough life so if he needs to leave the room to cool down, I let him. When he talks back to me, I ignore it because I know he'll become angry. Math seems to be a trigger too for him and I find it better to let him keep his head down during the lesson and I'll just work with him at a later time. But he continues to blow up at me and say really hurtful things to me and the other students. I really don't know what else to do."

Me: "I understand. I know you are trying. Kids do respond to structure and something to be able to count on. Maybe holding him to your classroom expectations will help because it sounds like maybe he's avoiding do the work or avoiding showing that he can't do the work. How could you support and scaffold instead of letting him keep his head down during math? Those may be things to think about."

Teacher: "I've tried that. He just can't handle being in a classroom with rules and expectations."

After she had said that I became a little frustrated. I thought, "She doesn't get it. She is over-accommodating this student and she is enabling him. I don't think she's ever going to realize that." This realization is important to me as a leader because, in fact, I could be perpetuating deficit thinking and working against myself and my beliefs. It is also in contrast to being a "Pollyanna Principal" yet in concert with my own zero tolerance for a zero-tolerance mindset.

Harder to acknowledge is the realization that I may have a deficit mindset towards myself. In my reflections regarding deficit mindsets with teachers, I expressed a sense of helplessness and defeat. I questioned whether I was an effective leader. I questioned if I was a male principal or a Black, male principal, "would I be better?" [more effective]. I found that I began to believe that I could "only do so much" and that was clearly not

enough. One assistant principal mentioned to me in one of our conversations that she believed "leaders have seasons and once you've done all you can do, it's time for someone else's season". I could not tell if this was in reference to me, since I was already sensitive about my own perceived incapability, or in general. I was too afraid to ask.

My rose-colored glasses are colliding with my own insecurities which creates cracks in my own façade and puts me on the path of self-doubt and vulerability. Beliefs are a powerful tool that can be used for "good or evil". My deficit mindset is hindering my progress to be "good".

Theme 4: White Savior

Throughout working on this research project, I attempted to avoid creating the perception of seeing myself as a white savior in my writing because that was not my motivation nor my intent. I also believe that this mindset is ultimately very detrimental to the work I am trying to do. However, much to my disbelief, dislike, and being truly disheartened, this theme became evident in my data collection. My statements, responses, and actions could be categorized as advocating for, teaching about, and being sensitive to how our students and families of color are "othered" in our school setting. Reflecting on the day-to-day interactions, I realized that I kept myself separate from "the problem" and viewed myself as more of a solution or as a means to a solution because of my knowledge and experiences. I let myself become vulnerable up to a point and then I stepped back. I could recite statistics, lead a book study, and encourage culturally relevant instructional planning. I recognized that our students of color, specifically our Black students, had inequitable outcomes and as the principal, I was going to change that. It appeared to me that I thought I was the authority on Black students and all things

inequitable and communicated in a manner as such. I wondered if I was a “white” savior because I just happen to be white or if there is no way to separate it out--- either you are or you’re not.

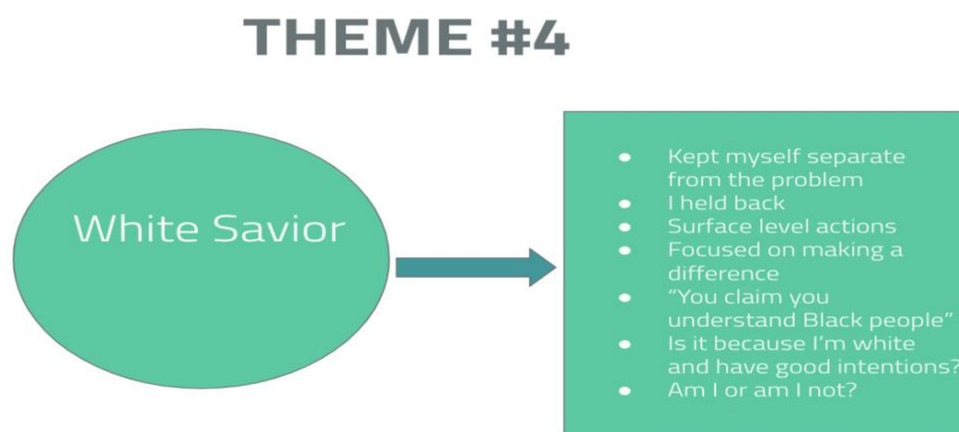

Figure 12. Theme 4. White Savior. This figure illustrates a sample of the words and phrases extracted from coding.

There was one situation that culminated all this evidence towards this theme of seeing myself as a white savior. It was a very hot and humid day in May. A day where the air was thick, and the heat emanated from the concrete and black top of the parking lot. The COVID-19 restrictions prevented visitors in the building, so I had to meet with this parent in the parking lot. I could feel the sweat trickle down my back, and I was hoping this would be a quick conversation so I could get back inside where it was cooler.

My relationship with this parent was tumultuous. Sometimes we were on the same page and then sometimes, we were not. I joked that this parent was in “my club”, my club for the adults that were only allowed to speak with me due to the likelihood of them being verbally aggressive towards staff. This parent was hot, hotter than the concrete upon which we stood. She was already escalated and yelling at me, so much so that I couldn’t get a word in edgewise, though I tried. Sometimes, after she would vent for

awhile, she'd calm down a bit. That was not the case that day. I recalled words that she was shouting, "Y'all don't take care of us like we were taken care of when we was students" and "I'm done with this school. My girls ain't never coming back". As this particular situation escalated, she began walking to her car and as she turned around to face me, she became so frustrated and literally screamed at me,

> "You claim you understand Black people. You say you want Black kids to be supported and that you do all of these things with the teachers to help but it doesn't help and my kids are still discriminated against and left behind."

These words stung and still do for three reasons. One being that we had worked so hard together to have a good relationship. Second, I felt like I failed her and her children. Lastly, I felt like I failed my mother. My mother raised me to set out to right the wrongs of the world. She was fearless in her approaches and never backed down until the wrongs were righted. This drive to do good in the world and make a positive difference was in my blood, in my heart. Here I was, standing on that hot pavement, bewildered, and feeling defeated, as the sweat continued to trickle down my back.

While I unpacked this interaction in many ways, this became the catalyst for me to realize that maybe I really did see myself as the white savior and maybe that was the crux of the previous three themes that emerged during this study. Is it possible to reconcile my upbringing with my new notion of seeing myself as a white savior? I believe maybe I can up to a certain point—to the point where I was in the parking lot. The passion that my mother instilled in me fueled my good intentions and genuine love for making things right in any situation, especially those where I thought someone was being treated unfairly. However, the minute I brought my race (inadvertently or not), into the situation,

I was that white savior. I am not proud of this realization; however, it might be that this realization is the breakthrough I need to continue this journey.

Research Question Analysis

The four themes that I have identified through the coding of my data are used as a lens through which to analyze my data and provide answers to my research questions. The themes that are prevalent in my data are 1) A Pollyanna Principal 2) Zero Tolerance for Zero Tolerance 3) Deficit Mindsets and 4) White Savior. These themes are interwoven throughout my analysis of each of my research questions.

RQ1: How has implementing restorative practices and SW-PBIS simultaneously within a diverse, Title I urban-like school helped to shape my beliefs as a white, female principal?

There is a definite balance between urgency and passion versus reality and comfort-- how much can I push and when do I need to ease up. While this notion is not unique to the role of a principal, the nuances of the balancing act may be different because race plays such a definitive role in my experiences. Yet, at the heart of it, the relationships that are or are not cultivated will ultimately determine the answer.

Restorative Practices became the conduit to establishing good relationships: staff to staff, staff to student, student to student and staff to families. I include myself in the "staff" category. By nature of the restorative circle principles and format, the likelihood of all stakeholders gaining a voice increased. Everyone had the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings, yet with one caveat: trust. Until there was a sense of trust, someone only shared what was safe. I believed that a safe space could only develop when non-judgmental / non-evaluative listening occurred. I felt like I had to model this inside and

outside of cirlces. I could not be an “event” to someone else’s “response”, meaning that no matter what was said, I had to listen and not react upon it with judgment or valuation.

One example occurred when I had a conversation with a teacher who was not in support of using restorative practices in the classroom and especially when resolving conflict. She did not believe that “repairing the harm” was a better approach. She believed in punishment. The situation involved a white and Black student, where the Black student was being blamed for bullying behavior towards the white student. When she raised her voice to me and asked, “where’s the research [to support restorative practices]?” I withheld my emotions (frustration, zero tolerance for zero-tolerance), and just listened instead of retorting back with explanations of research or sending an email with research articles attached, like I had wanted to. As a leader, I believe it was necessary to create a safe space where opinions, fears, and challenges to beliefs can be respected and heard.

Safe spaces had to be created for students and parents as well. My students of color need to feel safe to express how they are feeling and how they are perceiving events, especially in the climate of today’s society. One powerful example was noted with a 5th grade student and his teacher. The Black student and white teacher were involved in a confrontation and the student ended up using profanity as he walked out of the classroom. While talking with the student, he disclosed that he felt like his teacher was racist because she called him out and not his white peer for doing the same thing. He decided he was not comfortable sharing this with his teacher himself and gave me permission to share it with his teacher. Once she had calmed down after the incident, I was able to listen to her and then share what the student had told me. While the teacher

disagreed with the student's perception, we were able to have the conversation because we had a safe space. The ability to have these conversations is laying the foundation for these tough conversations, especially ones where race is involved.

I believe that implementing SW-PBIS was beneficial in that we developed some continuity with our practices. We had a clear set of expectations and defined behaviors, what behaviors we wanted to see and which ones we did not want to see. I was excited that we revisited these behavior definitions each year and updated them to reflect what we were seeing. What we did not do was use a cultural lens when creating these definitions and that was a mistake. We continued to use a white, Eurocentric approach to define what was considered acceptable behavior and I believe this led to staff delineating behaviors and consequences. Frustrations mounted when behavior X did not always equal consequence Y and we continued having disparities in our discipline data.

Despite continuing to see racial disparities in our data and experiencing them in interactions, I still believe that restorative practices are key to building and strengthening positive relationships. My Pollyanna viewpoint is that if we have a means by which to communicate honestly and openly about race, situations and outcomes can only be improved over time. If I am being honest, that secret deficit mindset of mine tells me that natural attrition of some staff members is needed as we persevere and persist with restorative practices. Staff default to traditional mindsets when they do not know what to do instead. Therefore, until we replace those with unwavering traditional mindsets with those who have had positive experiences with restorative practices, we won't achieve a pure implementation. How can I reconcile within myself my Pollyanna persona with my own deficit mindset? Do I, myself, not contradict what I purport is needed for change?

The two approaches that I have taken towards school discipline have set me on a path of self-discovery that I believe will make me a stronger school principal. Ultimately, through my experiences and reflections upon them, I have come to my own beliefs:

- Stay focused on the positive while still being a realist
- Don't let being a realist fuel your own deficit mindset
- Race influences everything and that must be acknowledged
- Relationships continue to be key if change is going to happen

The societal climate today is one of racial and political tension amidst a world-wide pandemic. It would be easy to ease up and not push forward, as a white, female school principal. However, it is more important now than ever, to continue to identify and dialogue about race, prejudice, and systemic racism in schools. I take my career in my own hands by stating and believing this. Critical Race Theory has become a focus in the political landscape, especially in the district in which I work. I cannot ignore the risk but risking the outcome of not beginning conversations about race, is a much greater risk and one I am not willing to take.

RQ2: As a white, female principal, what are my perceptions of the staff response to a blended model of SW-PBIS and restorative practices?

My perceptions of the staff response can be categorized by being supportive, resistant, and hesitant. I view the staff responses as fluid and situational. Interestingly, I see that my perceptions are fluid and situational as well.

I believe that the staff are supportive of the two approaches to school discipline. They have embraced restorative circles and frequently share how much they look forward to their daily classroom circles. Some of their statements include:

“I feel more connected to my students than I ever have before”

“My students are sharing some heavy stuff and we were all in tears today”

“This has brought compassion and human to human connection back into our school”

Additionally, from the perspective of a beginning teacher, “It [SW-PBIS] has helped make things go so much smoother in my classroom. It’s like they want to do the right thing and are excited about doing the right thing”. How can I not be a Pollyanna Principal when I recall these statements?

Being supportive and being resistant are two sides of the same coin, I’ve come to believe. I don’t know that the two can ever be truly separated. As noted previously, I perceived that staff are genuinely supportive of implementing both approaches, but it’s also situational. The support and “buy-in” only go as far as when students are not presenting challenging behaviors. I also believe that this doesn’t apply to all staff members but a good number of them. While I believe staff understand the purpose behind our approaches, when the going gets tough, the approaches are viewed as a “silver bullet”. When the combination of approaches doesn’t work immediately to prevent or change problem behavior, staff quickly retreat back to “Students need consequences. Consequences are a part of life, and we can’t not have them”. My standard response to all statements like these has been “changing behavior is a process, not an event” and that we are “increasing the likelihood” in our school environment that students will display positive behaviors. My Pollyanna response does not stave off their resistance and deficit mindsets at times.

What I have noticed is that we are all hesitant to acknowledge the influence of race when “in the moment”. In our school improvement goal teams, we are well versed in “admiring data”. What I mean by that is, we are somewhat detached from the data and can easily point out disparities without being personally attached to it. This is also not a new concept in education, but it becomes a huge red flag when we look at academic and discipline data for our Black students. It appears that our conversations always shift to what we can do “to or for” our Black students but we never reflect inwards on what we can do “to or for” ourselves to improve outcomes for these students.

These conversations are uncomfortable and when I read my notes and reflections, this realization comes easily. One conversation reads as follows:

Teacher: “During circle today, XX called another student racist”

Me: “How did that conversation go?”

Teacher: “I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know if we could talk about it. I shut that conversation down”

Me: “How did the students respond?”

Teacher: “They all kind of looked at me like deer in headlights and didn’t say a word”

Me: “It might be worth talking to that student privately about why he said that”

Teacher: “I did. He said the other student calls him names too”

Me: “It sounds like you’re handling that situation alright”

Upon reflecting about that conversation, I realized that we were both hesitant to talk about race and the comment the student made. I am ashamed of my lack of response and that the class had a great opportunity to talk about race in a safe space at that moment and the teacher chose not to. This illustrates how I perceive staff as being hesitant to talk

about race. Staff are not comfortable addressing it because it opens doors to discussions they may have not had or if they have had them, they have not gone well. Fear. Fear of not knowing how the conversations will go. Fear of not knowing the right thing to say. Fear of hurting students' feelings. Fear of repercussions from parents, administrators, school boards. I mention all of this because at the heart of implementing restorative circles, we want to encourage dialogue around sensitive topics because those topics are a part of students' lives. In this case, both the teacher and myself were hesitant to utilize the restorative circle to address the situation.

RQ3: How do I, as a white, female principal, contribute to the environment that produces discipline disparities? How do I combat it?

I am white and I am female. All my experiences, beliefs, thoughts, actions, and biases contribute to our environment that produces discipline disparities. It is impossible for me to avoid it so I must find ways within myself and as a principal to combat it. Inward reflection is where I must start.

Being a Pollyanna Principal, I choose to see, hear, and recall the positive. That is not a bad trait, however, it is not conducive to reducing and eliminating the discipline disparities that we see. By glossing over situations and avoiding uncovering the harsher truth about how race is influencing the outcomes for students, I perpetuate those disparities. It was evident throughout my data collection, that I shied away from confronting those involved in situations after the fact that would expose prejudice, discrimination, or racial bias. For example, after I reflected upon each of the five major incidents that involved a white staff member and a Black student, I consciously chose not to confront the staff member for a few different reasons:

- “Saying something to her will send her over the edge. She’s already on the verge of having a breakdown and if I bring up that the student felt she was being racist or that I even saw how her actions escalated the situation, she’d lose her mind”.
- “I don’t know where to even begin with her. Her words and actions go against everything about her [role]. I still can’t believe she thinks that way and I can’t change that”.
- “I want her to feel supported because I truly believe she doesn’t know what to do and if I point out the disparity in her responses, she will let her negativity spread throughout her grade level and that will set us back in trying to build that team”.

There is, however, the possibility that my own fears and deficit thinking towards myself contribute to the reasons as to why I did not confront these staff members and talk about my perceptions about those specific situations. This is cause for further reflection on my part.

Just like the teacher sets the tone of the classroom, the principal sets the tone of the school. As the leader of implementing these two alternative approaches to school discipline, I can now begin to see how my whiteness influences our practices and ultimately contributes to the very disparities I seek to eliminate. I was foolish to think that it would not be a factor, yet it is evident in the lack of cultural awareness in our behavior expectations and definitions of problem behaviors. My absence of addressing cultural bias with the team that created our plans, in fact, increased the likelihood that these policies and practices would adversely impact our students of color. What’s frustrating is that I know this is best practice, yet I could not see the converse happening right in front of me. I hypothesize that my white savior syndrome clouded my judgement as evidenced

by my doing this "to/for" students of color and not "with." As painful as it is to admit, it is true.

My white savior syndrome, coupled with a deficit mindset for some staff and students, is illustrated in another example from a school leadership team meeting. We were once again admiring our subgroup data and attempting to write school improvement goals to address the disparities we were seeing in our academic and discipline data. The data sets indicated that the largest gaps were between our white and Black students and therefore, it seemed logical that we would target that population of our students. An African American teacher on our team pointedly asked me a question that caused much reflection on my part. She asked, "Why is it we're focusing just on Black students? Don't you believe they can achieve? Why are we singling them out?" I paused and struggled to understand her point of view. In my reflections, I tried to process this event. I wondered why she didn't see that we wanted to help our Black students to succeed and were making an intentional effort to do just that. What I did not see was that my white savior syndrome was overtaking my ability to understand her point of view and see it from her perspective. This is another way that I contribute to sustaining disparate outcomes for our students of color.

Change must start with me, within me. I must confront my own biases and beliefs for what they are before I can begin to truly assist in changing our school environment to one that is equitable for all students. All my good intentions are useless until I do this. Leading book studies, sharing research articles, taking staff on field trips, bringing in culturally responsive professional development opportunities, are all well and good, but ultimately become ineffective unless the real hard work of self-reflection and self-

realization happen in tandem. Instead of choosing a deficit mindset of myself, I am choosing the Pollyanna mindset that while I have made mistakes, this research project is not one of them. What I have learned about myself during this time is the way I will and should combat my contributions that sustain disparities in our school environment.

The culmination of this study is captured in the following chapter. Synthesizing the research surrounding school discipline and alternative approaches to school discipline set the stage to conduct my study. The selection of Critical Race Theory as the lens to guide my study was essential to my self-reflection and realizations. The connections of my findings to the tenets of CRT have provided critical insight that created the foundation for the implications and recommendations for future research and actions. All of this combined has given me inspiration to continue this work and pride in taking the first steps to reimagine school discipline in a way that can reduce the disparities our Black students experience.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a summary of this research project and share insightful discovery through five main sections. Research questions are reviewed and situated within the context of the background to this study in the first section. The second section provides a review of the methodology used in this study. The summary of the results and subsequent findings, along with the relationship to the literature, are shared in the fourth section. Finally, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and conclusion to this study.

Background and Research Questions

Acknowledging the plethora of research surrounding disparate outcomes for students of color with regards to school discipline, I wanted to explore my perceptions as a white, female principal while implementing two alternative approaches to school discipline. I found myself wrestling to find the balance between restorative practices (specifically circles) and the use of traditional punishment practices. While multitudes of research exist surrounding the implementation of SW-PBIS and a growing body of research for restorative practices, there is a gap focusing on both approaches being implemented in tandem and little, if any, from the perspective of a white, female principal serving a school with urban-like characteristics.

The school where this study took place has a large enrollment of students with diverse backgrounds, a higher rate of poverty (65-75%), and a history of low student achievement and high rates of disciplinary infractions and suspensions. It is difficult to attract and retain highly effective teachers and sometimes the turnover rate mimics the

transiency of our families. Therefore, the following research questions were created and guided this study:

1) How has implementing restorative practices and SW-PBIS simultaneously within a diverse, Title I, urban-like school helped to shape my beliefs as a white, female principal?
2) As a white, female principal, what are my perceptions of the staff response to a blended model of SW-PBIS and restorative practices?
3) How do I, as a white, female principal, contribute to the environment that produces discipline disparities? How do I combat it?

Autoethnography, as a research design model, was selected because it would allow for deep reflection and critical analysis of self around the topics of race and school discipline that other models could not provide. I was intentional and strategic with my methods and approach to this study. My intentions were heartfelt and honest, and despite uncovering some unattractive truths, the value of this work is not negatable. The introspective discussion that has resulted from this study sets the stage for other school principals to embark on a similar path of self-reflection.

Review of Methodology

This qualitative study employed an autoethnographic design guided by three research questions. Adherence to a strict research protocol was necessary to maintain trustworthiness of this study. I believe this also provided a framework that supported the discovery of my own voice and gave credence to conclusions that I feared.

Over the course of a four-week period, I maintained a notebook where I documented day to day happenings, including conversations and situations. This

notebook served as a road map for my reflections. Each week, I devoted one to two hours just reflecting on the notebook entries from the week. This “journaling therapy” opened doors and windows to my very own thoughts and feelings that I maybe suspected I had, but never put in writing. As the sole participant in my study, developing my voice was integral to the success of my work.

Throughout the four weeks of data collection, I highlighted words, thoughts, and phrases to pre-code and identify some patterns. Positivity and frustration were two patterns that developed during the pre-coding. During the actual coding, it required many passes over the data collected to find the salient quotes and then categorize them into the four themes that I had discovered: A Pollyanna Principal, Zero Tolerance for Zero-Tolerance, Deficit Mindsets, and White Savior. Using Narrative Analysis, the first two themes were possibly suspected; however, the last two themes captured my attention and provoked a myriad of emotions. I would not have had the same results and those results would not have such a strong impact on me if I had selected a different research design. Autoethnography provided a window where one did not previously exist.

Office discipline referrals disaggregated by race and the district staff satisfaction survey results were two archival data sets that were most useful in triangulating my data. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the office discipline data indicated that racial disparities existed between Black and white students. That data, coupled with the 2020 NC TWCS data, supported the theme of my being a Pollyanna Principal.

Summary of the Results and Findings

A white, female principal reimagining school discipline to eradicate disparities is an important venture in the quest to create equitable outcomes for all students. However,

even with the best intentions, I found that I was complicit in perpetuating the very outcomes I was working to prevent. The connection between race and discipline was prevalent throughout my study. I was quick to recognize it, slow to change it, and continued to utilize the use of traditional disciplinary practices on some occasions. This realization embarrassed and invigorated me all at the same time. While it was difficult to acknowledge, I knew I had taken a giant step forward on my professional and personal path.

My goal was to explore my perceptions of staff and of myself and my beliefs within a context of implementing two alternative approaches to school discipline. While those realizations are organized and categorized within four central themes, I continue to discuss those results in connection with the five tenets of Critical Race Theory, the theoretical framework I used for this study. The five tenets addressed are as follows: 1) Racism is ordinary 2) Interest of convergence 3) Race is a social construct 4) Storytelling and counter story and 5) Whites have been the recipients of civil rights legislation. I believe this is crucial to understand the complexity of the findings, as the results appear to just be common and expected when connected with the general literature presented in chapters one and two.

Discussion of Findings and Their Connection to Critical Race Theory

The first tenet of Critical Race Theory claims that racism is ordinary and is woven into the fabric of everyday life, into all systems, practices, policies, rules, and laws. As discussed in chapter 1, access to education directly correlates to race and property ownership. Education affords social mobility as well. Therefore, it stands to reason that

by excluding African American students from education maintains this stratification of classes and oppressive systems.

The research is quite clear about African American students are suspended at least four times more than their white counterparts and for subjective behaviors such as disruption, defiance, and disrespect (Losen, 2015; Losen & Martinez, 2020). We, primarily white, middle-class women, defined these behaviors prior to creating our school-wide matrix of core expectations that govern our behavior management system. Our core expectations and definitions were developed using a Euro-centric lens on what disrespect, defiance, and disruption looked like and how we responded.

While knowing the importance of cultural relevancy, , I did not connect our practices to sustaining institutional racism (SW-PBIS and continued traditional disciplinary practices). Therefore, I was a contributor to the disproportionality in our discipline data.

Interest convergence, the second tenet, exposes me as a self-identified “white savior”. Reflecting on why I chose to implement SW-PBIS in tandem with restorative practices, I realized that the reason was two-fold. Through my experiences as a school administrator and doctoral student, I was acutely aware of the disparities in school discipline. I believe this purpose was pure. However, could a subconscious, or even conscious, motive be recognition and acknowledgement of making a difference? I believe that could be true on some level. In my study, I reflected on making it known to everyone that we were being successful (or so I thought). That indicates to me that there was some motive for recognition, which could also be tied to my own insecurities as a turn-around principal.

The third tenet, race is a social construct, easily shines light on how zero-tolerance policies are present in words, thoughts, actions, and responses. Laws and policies, such as the zero-tolerance policy, that adversely affect Black students under the guise of keeping schools safe, are used to maintain the status quo of power. If a child is prevented from accessing education due to suspensions or expulsions, that child has the increased risk of not graduating high school and thus denied social mobility. I found myself culpable in this as I continued to suspend students that fought or were continuously disrespectful towards adults (based on our Euro-centric definitions). I admit that I struggled balancing the traditional punishment expectations with my desire to not suspend at all based on knowing how detrimental that course of action was.

As a school principal, I felt that I was held accountable to employing punitive consequences based on district and stakeholder expectations. Parents still demanded that “the other student” receive harsh consequences and while they never know the outcome of consequences for the other students, it is expected. Staff still held those same expectations and on certain occasions, I believed I would get more leverage with staff in the long run if I engaged with punitive consequences. Maintaining this unique balance was what I believed to be necessary to shift mindsets to build an understanding that while all actions have consequences, not all consequences are tied to punishments. My internal struggle consistently pointed out “at what cost” and the balance shifted to that of urgency and changing belief systems.

An autoethnographic study tells a story, my story, and I realized that my work was the counter story to the storytelling of the decades of disproportionate disciplinary outcomes. The fourth tenet outlines storytelling and counter story telling. Every story that

is told through our curriculum, core values and expectations, and laws and policies demonstrate the beliefs and ideologies of white people. My study conveys my experiences told through my own lens as a white, female principal. Through this study of self-discovery, it is evident that I denied or was blind to the role I played in perpetuating these disparities in school discipline. The one Black parent that was brave enough to let me know that she thought I didn't understand Black people is now an opportunity for me to see that as a break-through realization of the importance to acknowledge and understand both stories.

The fifth tenet demonstrates how whites have been the recipients of civil rights legislation and as a school leader, it is imperative to understand and recognize the racial neutrality and how that sustains the inequitable policies and practices that adversely impact students of color. Capper (2015) cites Horsford (2010) as cautioning that "inclusion programs and initiatives that fail to recognize how race and racism work to maintain hierarchies, allocate resources, and distribute power will not do much to address gaps in student achievement, low school performance, and distrusting school communities" (p. 818). I understood how our current policies and practices sustained structural racism, but I neglected to realize that the absence of explicitly addressing race and racism in my two initiatives maintained the status quo. Therefore, I was still complicit in the discipline disparities for my students of color.

Implications

The implications of this study could have a significant impact on school leadership and the implementation of initiatives with the intent of reducing racial disproportionality in school discipline. The current political landscape that denounces

Critical Race Theory and works to sustain laws, policies, and practices that perpetuate white power and privilege could be treacherous to navigate and may create additional barriers to the success of such initiatives. Three of the major implications for this study include 1) white principals need to reflect on their whiteness and how they are complicit in sustaining structural racism and inequitable outcomes 2) race and racial disparities need to become a part of routine conversations embedded within initiatives that are going to be implemented and 3) it is essential to analyze current policies and practices and uncover the truths of how they perpetuate racism in the school.

Realizing the influence and impact of my whiteness during this study was eye opening, humbling, and inspiration to do better, to be better. While my initial intentions were good, I uncovered how much work is still left to be done. I am not negating the benefits we did see by implementing these initiatives, but they could have been so much more if I had first considered my race and how I might be contributing to and sustaining the inequitable practices and policies that maintain the status quo for white members of our school community. White principals in urban or urban-like settings truly need to self-reflect, self-assess, and listen to the counter narratives being told in their data and the voices of their students and families of color.

Conversations about race and racism need to become a part of daily conversations and those conversations must include students, families, and teachers of color. In the majority of settings, I believe principals will need to carefully navigate this endeavor given the political and controversial landscape that has infiltrated our schools and communities recently. The importance of this cannot be lost in fear of retaliation or public shaming, however, it is a reality that must be considered. How one will navigate

this will depend upon on the stances taken by superintendents, district leaders, school boards, and community members. In my experience over the last two years, it was necessary to put some of these conversations on pause to protect myself and staff from any backlash. The “Anti-CRT Movement” is real and aggressive, and we would be remiss to not recognize it and the impact it has on this work. What I failed to do was protect my students and families of color by being complicit by being silent. That is why I need to do better and be better. Any principals taking on such initiatives will need to truly consider all aspects. I was fortunate enough to have the support of the district leadership, however, lack of support would be a hinderance to any principal wanting to implement alternative approaches. At the end of the day, all principals have to answer to the superintendent and the superintendent must answer to the Board of Education. The policies must be followed and some initiatives could definitely be derailed if the support is not there.

As a white principal, it was difficult for me to realize how my well-intended practices and policies still adversely affected our students of color. Even if some practices were culturally relevant, they still were not going to transform our school in the way it needed to be. It is vital that we take a hard look at what we have in place and analyze the policies and practices through the eyes of a student or family of color. It is imperative that we dismantle our Euro-centric policies and practices and rebuild them to support all students, not just the white students. The belief that Black or Brown students should assimilate into our schools and conform to our inequitable expectations is ludicrous at best. Reimaging systems and practices, using the counter narrative as a guide, will push

white educators out of their comfort zones. Then again, we, the white educators, have been comfortable for too long.

Limitations

The research design itself is a limitation to this study. As the sole participant, my experiences are unique to me and my situation. While the framework of the study could be generalized to other studies, similar results should not be expected. This study did not consider other races and gender of a principal. I am a white, female principal and a male principal of color may have different experiences and lenses to use as the foundation to their study. Of course, there a multitude of other variables that would impact the outcomes of a different study such as size and location of the school, races of staff and students, socio-economic status of families, and policies and practices of the school and district.

Another limitation to this study is the absence of the voice of our Black students and their families. While the archival data represents the perceived stories or counter stories, it is no comparison to listening to actual thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Black students and families during the study. I can only imagine the richness that would be added to this study if the stories and counter stories were present in partnership to improve disparities of outcomes for students of color with regards to school disciplinary practices.

Recommendations for Implementation of Alternative Practices

Any educational leader will tell you that one must develop a strategic implementation plan prior to implementing a new initiative. Implementation Science is what guided our plan and process. Using the three implementation drivers of leadership,

organization, and competency, we were able to effectively implement restorative practices and SW-PBIS (Rowe, Collier-Meek, Kittleman, & Pierce, 2021).

The very first step was to conduct a needs assessment and I had staff verbalize the characteristics of their “dream school”, an activity that I used in module one of a SW-PBIS professional development session. The main characteristics that were identified were positive relationships, trust, kindness, and prosocial behavior by students and adults. When presenting the new initiatives, we were able to demonstrate how restorative practices and SW-PBIS would help us get our dream school.

As the school principal, I capitalized on the leadership driver by creating a strategic plan with the collaboration and support of our school leadership team. In our plan, we identified and addressed any foreseen barriers that staff may face while implementing both initiatives. Throughout the first year, we recognized and celebrated staff as they moved towards increasing the fidelity of their implementation of these practices. We also celebrated the “flops” at staff meetings, where we shared the funny stories of when something did not go as planned.

For the organization driver, it is necessary to ensure our policies facilitated our implementation plan and that the foreseen barriers were eliminated. The barriers that we identified were time to implement the new practices during the school day, comfort level of staff, and how to provide ongoing support. We created a master schedule that carved out 20 minutes every morning for each classroom to hold a restorative community building circle before our core instructional blocks began. I set the expectation that everyone was to participate in a daily circle every day, including administrators. Not everyone would feel comfortable sharing feelings and allowing students to take control of

the dialogue. The fear of not knowing what to say also fed into their comfort level. This barrier was addressed through designing two days of professional development and practice. The ongoing support was also delivered in the form of feedback and mini-professional development sessions throughout the school year. Our leadership team also created "circle lessons" that were modeled after the lessons in the *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015) text. These lessons provided daily support to the teachers that were uncomfortable with not knowing what to say.

The competency driver reinforces the need for and value of hiring the right staff. Specific questions were embedded in our interviews to gain insight on the beliefs and practices of the candidates. Through the flexibility that I had with staffing in the Restart reform model, I created a Classroom Culture Coach position whose main responsibility was to model, coach and support staff with implementing restorative circles and SW-PBIS. Additionally, high quality professional development and coaching were planned and delivered.

The final piece was to develop a tool that the leadership team could use to monitor the fidelity of implementation. We created two simple Google forms, one for SW-PBIS and one for restorative circles. The data that was collected, analyzed, and used to inform the ongoing professional development plans and any new barriers to be addressed.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is worthwhile to explore the counter narrative, the voices of students and families of color. Their experiences, perceptions, and feelings would provide valuable insight into how disciplinary policies and practices impact them, in one given school year

or over the course of several years. Another facet for consideration to study would be how I move forward with addressing our disparities in school discipline knowing what I know now. It would also be interesting to conduct a study with multiple principals addressing the same inequities and disparities.

At the heart of my personal journey, I wanted to shift mindsets to continue moving forward in improving disciplinary outcomes for Black students. I never realized that my own mindset would shift as well. A future study that takes a focus on shifting mindsets (the what, the who, the how, the when) could provide even deeper insight into changing the direction of a school, a district, and beyond.

One important consideration that should be made is how vital a role that cultural relevance and responsiveness plays in this research. It is not just race that influences perceptions, beliefs, and actions, but culture as well. Where I did not consider Culturally Relevant PBIS, I should have. As previously discussed, we created systems and practices based on our Eurocentric, middle class ideals and values. It was no wonder that our discipline data did not show a reduction in disproportionality. By not including cultural differences, I essentially negated the very things with which our students identify. I did nothing to bridge those differences and that is not a mistake I will make again.

Recommendations for School Stakeholders

The connection between race and school discipline cannot be ignored and since students spend the majority of their time with their classroom teacher, it is essential for teachers to understand the connection and how race influences not only the disparities in school discipline, but how it also works to sustain institutional racism. Chances are, the teachers did not learn this in their undergraduate classes. How to help teachers understand

and realize these points is a delicate endeavor. Awareness should be the first step and using a school's own discipline data to drive discussions may be an effective way to start the conversations around discipline disproportionality and inequitable outcomes.

White, female principals who serve diverse student populations should first build an understanding of all of the factors that contribute to discipline disproportionality. Using that knowledge, I recommend, and applying it to one's own self for reflection and awareness with regards to race and culture. The change has to start there, with the white, female principal before she can affect change elsewhere. The next steps would be to gather input from all stakeholders to determine which approaches to alternative discipline would be most beneficial and why. Once that has been determined, a careful, intentional strategic plan for implementation should be created.

For the teachers and staff, they should build a common knowledge of the approaches selected and how they will support achieving the school's goals. They should also be included in the decision-making process so that their ideas and thoughts are mirrored in the plan. This will increase buy-in or more importantly, investment in the initiatives. Additionally, teachers and staff should participate in training to build their emotional vocabulary and skills to mediate and/or participate in conflict resolution.

A great opportunity lies with university teacher preparation programs and schools to embed this new learning in all of the work they do to support student teachers. More courses on cultural awareness and relevancy, culturally responsive instruction, and the influence of race in the institution of education, historical and present day. Student teachers need to have varied student teaching experiences so that they are equipped with at least a little bit of experience in working with students of color. Cooperating teachers

and school administrators should debrief after an incident regarding student misbehavior and discuss all angles, including the influence of race, of the situation.

Through my study, I learned that while awareness of an issue is important, self-awareness is essential. It is recommended that all school stakeholders have the opportunity to reflect and learn about their own biases, prejudices, culture, and beliefs impact the outcomes for students. As an administrator, I have also learned that I must listen and seek to understand first, when working with parents and guardians. As a white administrator who works primarily with parents and guardians of color, I have to realize that I cannot possibly understand the magnitude of harm our systems, policies, and laws have had on people of color and how they have worked to minoritize those populations. Listening, seeking to understand first, and asking how I can help rather than assuming I know what these parents and guardians need, will be the better approach.

Conclusion

Conducting this study of reimagining school discipline as a white, female principal has been an intense experience, grounded in strong feelings and emotions. The act of self-realization is never easy and for me, was more difficult than I had anticipated. It is the first step in my journey to transform school discipline. It is a vital step that all school leaders should take to improve the outcomes for students of color.

Employing an autoethnographic design, my study focused on my perceptions, experiences, and feelings as a white, female principal during a four-week period of implementing two alternative approaches to school discipline. My data analysis revealed four themes: A Pollyanna Principal, Zero Tolerance for Zero-Tolerance, Deficit Mindsets, and White Savior. Critical Race Theory was used as the theoretical framework

that provided the lens through which to view the essential meanings and profound realizations of my study. My study was timely and relevant to these tumultuous times in our society.

News media has become the battleground for opposing views on racism and white privilege. The political landscape has made it acceptable for some white people to openly fight for the oppressive systems that protect their power and privilege. In response, there have also been public outrage and protests, specifically with regards to the use of excessive force by the police. Yet, cities are also recognizing the names, statues, and historical monuments that represent racism and oppression of our Black community members and are working to remove or rename them (sports teams, street names, school building names, etc.). While these are important steps, they will not be enough.

For the white, female principals that want to embark on this journey, there is not one specific road map to follow. However, the lessons that I have learned may help guide you on your own journey. It is imperative to understand that restorative practices are not a "program" to be implemented, but a belief that everyone has value, everyone is good at their core, and relationships should be nurtured and repaired for continued growth (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Developing your own road map should include building a solid understanding of restorative practices and then providing professional development for staff to build their understanding and garner their support. Two key practices are active listening and self-reflection, which should be embedded at every stage. Acknowledging and unpacking the influence of race in our systems, practices, and data will only serve you well as you reimagine school discipline and shift mindsets. to move forward. Authentic discussions and intentional building of emotional literacy will

have a positive impact on the work that you will do. Know that your journey will be unique to you and the school community your serve. I am proud of you in advance for having the courage to reimagine school discipline.

At the macro-level, the systemic racism found in policies throughout various systems such as economic, legislative, health care, and education needs to be dismantled and new systems and policies need to be created. Educators can begin by restructuring what is taught and how it is taught for academics, behavior, and social emotional learning. Disciplinary systems, policies, and practices will continue to set up our students of color for failure until we make a change.

As educators, we have to believe in the mantra “All means All”, meaning that what we do should and must support all students. Having an MTSS framework provides the opportunity to create systems and practices to support all students, however, that is not enough. Our students need to see themselves in our curricula, our lessons, our pedagogy. They need to see themselves in their teachers and in behavioral practices. Cultural relevancy and responsiveness cannot be an option, it needs to be a requirement. This time in our society is a golden opportunity to embark on the path of uniting people and build a healthy connection that supports positive relationships. A school is a reflection on society and if we want to change our society, we need to start with the schools, with a principal, with the educators, and community.

As a white, female principal, I will continue my path to do better and be better, self-reflecting along the way. As I gaze up at a picture of my mother, pregnant with me, I know she would be proud. “She raised me right”, as we say in the South. The desire to

right the wrongs and make a difference remain within my heart, inside of me. Change must start with me, within me. This journey has just begun.

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