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Dissertation Title: Disproportionate Suspension and Special Education Identification of African American Students: A Case Study in the Early Elementary Grades

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Statement of Academic Integrity

I certify that I am the author of the work contained in this dissertation and that it represents my original research and conclusions. I pledge that apart from my committee, faculty, and other authorized support personnel and resources, I have received no assistance in developing the research, analysis, conclusions, or text contained in this document, nor has anyone written or provided any element of this work to me.

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HOOD COLLEGE

Dissertation Title, Disproportionate Suspension and Special Education Identification of African American Students: A Case Study in the Early Elementary Grades

A DISSERTATION

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DOCTORAL COMMITTEE

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Linda J. Chambers find

that this dissertation fulfills the requirements and meets the standards of the Hood College

Doctoral Program in Organizational Leadership and recommend that it be approved.

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DEDICATION

To my Lord and Savior, my eternal gratefulness for the strength and endurance through the Holy Spirit to complete this journey. To my husband; my mentor, best friend and number one supporter, I could not have done this without you. Thank you for all of your support along the way. Thank you for the sacrifices you endured, the love you covered me with and your constant understanding and holding down the fort for the last three years, every Saturday and during the long, lonely stretches of my reading and writing. To my Mom and Dad, thank you for always believing in me and supporting me. To Pastor and First Lady, thank you for encouraging me toward my destiny and helping me to grow and flourish. Finally, to my beautiful daughter, Jordan, may you find your passion in life and pursue it with vigor always. I pray one day my example gives you strength. I love you. This work is dedicated to all of you.

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Linda J. Chambers, DOL

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ABSTRACT

Disparate discipline and special education identification of African American students has been extensively documented showing a relationship between race/ethnic status and suspension/special education identification rates; yet the reasons for the disparities are less understood. The data on disproportionality for early elementary students are on the rise triggering states to implement suspension bans for elementary students, but there is limited research related to alternative interventions to suspension for this age group. This qualitative case study examined and contributed to research on disproportionality at the early elementary grades and considered interventions that may disrupt this disproportionality cycle that is pervasive across grade levels. The study investigated the effectiveness of a locally developed process where school teams, including an administrator and school-based mental health professional, consider suspension for students in grades pre-kindergarten through grade 2. This study answered the following questions: (1) the impact of the suspension consideration process on suspension and special education identification rates (2) what influences school teams' discipline decision-making (3) staff perceptions about the suspension consideration process fidelity and effectiveness in reducing suspension and (4) the ways implicit bias influences decision-making in suspension and special education identification. Methods employed in the study included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participants included

administrators and school psychologists who are members of the suspension consideration process from elementary schools in a large Pre-K-12 mid-Atlantic school system (pseudonym Big Valley). The Big Valley suspension consideration process, implemented after a state Senate Bill was passed banning early elementary student suspensions, did impact suspension and special education identification rates evidencing a significant decrease in suspension rates and special education identification rates, but disproportionality was noted for students who were African American as compared to their non-African American peers. Ways to decrease disproportionality were recommended including: having mental health professionals in every school, implementing social emotional learning curriculum explicitly teaching students social skills and self-regulation, and using restorative practices to resolve conflict and prevent future harm to keep students in schools. Participants shared that adverse childhood experiences, including trauma, are an impacting factor, beyond race, that needs to be addressed for early elementary learners.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Researcher Positionality

School districts and researchers across the nation are asking why African American[1] students are suspended away from school and identified into special education at disproportionate rates as compared to their non-African American peers. In this study, I posed the same question and further inquired how existing practices, programs, and policies can be improved to eliminate this disproportionality. The discussion is a delicate one, as institutional racism and individual, implicit bias conversations require a candor and personal reflection that is often difficult to navigate in both a personal and a professional setting.

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[1] **A Note about Language**

Jones (2013) shared that Gallup polls have asked the "African American" or "Black" preference question of Black respondents eight times since 1991. Each time, majorities of between 56 percent and 66 percent of Blacks have said it does not matter to them which term is used. The preferences of those who do say it matters have been mixed over the years. In some cases, as in the 2013 poll, about as many prefer to be called "Black" as "African American." In other cases, including the last three polls, slightly more expressed a preference to be called "African American" than "Black" (Jones, J. M., 2013). The term "African American" was used throughout this study.

My personal and professional story paints a picture of why I am led to research disproportionality in suspension and special education identification through the lens of a qualitative case study. As a young child growing up in a primarily White community, my best friend was the only African American female in a rural school during the 1980's. This friendship meant the world to me and I could not understand why we were picked on by our classmates. And even more overwhelming, I noted that my best friend was treated differently than her peers by school staff. I remember this treatment made my friend sad and I hated to see her sad. I was allowed to spend the night at her home one time and remember my mother saying under no circumstances was I to share a hair comb with my best friend at this sleepover. This initial exposure, to what I understand now as racism, had a lasting impact on my world view at a very young age.

Fast forward to today, I am married to an African American male and we have raised our daughter, who identifies as Black. This relationship with my husband was met with much disdain, early on, whereby I was disowned from my family, for a time, because of my choice to marry outside of my race. I love both my White family that I have known all my life and my African American immediate and extended family of over twenty-five years. I attend a primarily African American church for the past decade where I have relationships with families through fellowship, church leadership and ministry, as well as teaching the youth Sunday school.

"Researchers frequently make a sharp separation between research and the rest of their lives," but "a particularly important advantage of basing your research topic on your own experience is motivation" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 24). Qualitative methodologist John Maxwell (2013), suggests that it is necessary to be aware of your personal bias and how it shapes your research, while thinking about how to best achieve your goals and deal with the possible negative

consequences of the researcher's bias influence on the study. My ingrained personal experiences collectively provide me with the opportunity to empathize with African American culture in this research study. I also can be confidently objective in the qualitative research process as I am continually conscience of my personal bias. I, like many Americans, have followed the media related to aspects of racism, including the many examples of police brutality against African American citizens that are highlighted in current events. These examples have been the center of many courageous, objective, and at the same time, opinionated discussions in class with graduate students, with my colleagues, and with members of my family and close friends. The details of each situation, whether perceived or actual racism, are sensitive conversations for me as they have a direct impact on my personal experiences, my immediate family and my experiences with friends and family.

As an adjunct professor, in a graduate school focused on educational leadership development, I have taught *Educational Philosophy in a Diverse Society* where the focus is tooling aspiring administrators with cultural proficiency strategies across student groups. This preparation helps them to create a school culture where closing the achievement gap while providing equitable access to learning is the goal. The course allowed participants to recognize and investigate individual, ingrained biases. I taught about diversity. I was able to help aspiring administrators have not only awareness of their biases but also have conversations with families and staff related to equity in access and achievement in the classroom for all student groups. I value the systematic focus, in both the school system in which I work and the graduate school where I am employed, on individuals uncovering and acknowledging biases to allow for equity in access of learning for students.

Other experiences that have shaped my interest in this research topic are my teaching experiences in the public-school system with students of multiple races, ethnicities, and disabilities for fifteen years. I currently work for Big Valley in an administrative special education leadership position where I am directly involved in reviewing specific quantitative data points of disproportionality in discipline and special education identification for the school district, as well as per individual student. I am tasked to collaboratively develop processes and procedures related to minimizing the disproportionality of African American students with disabilities who are suspended, as well as those who are identified into special education disproportionately. Alongside that work responsibility, I work collaboratively with school teams to problem solve alternatives to suspension for specific students in real time and determine what is best for that individual student who is struggling to access their learning after a pattern of behavioral infractions.

Most recently, those discussions are more often about our youngest students in the elementary grades. In line with national statistics, disproportionality in discipline and special education identification is happening as early as preschool in the large mid-Atlantic school district that is the focus of this study. As well, states are passing mandates that our youngest learners cannot be suspended except for short periods of time and only for egregious incidents. School teams are struggling to meet the needs of these early learners. Each of these young children have their own complex story and their behavior manifests in ways that are vastly different than previously experienced by school staff. These conversations about our youngest learners and their behavior are now more common, but the solutions are less readily evident.

Because of these collective personal and professional experiences over my lifetime, I have developed core beliefs and assumptions. I believe everyone is created equal. I believe in

equity for all. I disagree with degrading any group based upon differences. I believe individuals should be held accountable for their actions, including those who break rules or laws, regardless of the color of their skin. I believe everyone holds implicit biases that need to be acknowledged in order to dispel the implication of racism. I also believe implicit bias affects the discipline of students who are African American, as well as our decisions in identifying these students for special education services.

Much of the research related to disproportionality in discipline and special education identification is quantitative and looks at whether disproportionality exists and what variables influence it. There are very few studies regarding disproportionality in discipline and special education identification with our youngest learners and far less studies examining this through a qualitative lens. As the researcher in this study, I felt it was important to add a human perspective to the disproportionality question initially posed through implementation of a qualitative case study focused on our youngest learners. This study investigated a process put into place in Big Valley where school teams will consider if suspension of a student is warranted per each suspension consideration. This study filled a gap in the research, which is timely to the needs of school systems across the nation.

Background

Disproportionality in suspension and special education identification of African American students is a complex and persistent issue in public education. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education was a pivotal turning point in American education (Zirkle & Cantor, 2004). In this ruling, the Supreme Court of the United States recognized the detrimental effects of state-sanctioned racial segregation for students of color and found that the

resulting educational inequalities deprived students of color equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment (*Brown v. Board of Education,* 1954). Moreover, still 60 plus years after the Brown ruling, the issue of educational inequalities faced by students of color remains today.

The U. S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights School and Safety Release of 2015-2016 data (2018) and data from the previous Civil Rights Data Collection of the 2013-2014 school year (Office of Civil Rights, 2016) report national statistics of disproportionality in suspensions in public education. The statistics are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Office of Civil Rights National Statistics of Disproportionality

African American students are three times more likely to be suspended away from school than White students (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014 & 2015-2016; Lewin, 2012; Skiba, 2013).
More than one out of four African American boys with disabilities (served by the Individuals with Disabilities Act-IDEA) and one in five African American girls with disabilities (served by the Individuals with Disabilities Act-IDEA) receives an out-of-school suspension (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014).
Students with disabilities (IDEA) represent 12 percent of students enrolled and 26 percent of students who receive an out-of-school suspension (Civil Rights Data, 2015-2016).
African American male students represent 8 percent of enrolled students and account for 25 percent of students who receive an out-of-school suspension. African American female students represent 8 percent of the student enrollment and account for 14 percent of students who receive an out-of-school suspension (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016).
African American students represent 15 percent of student enrollment and they represent 31 percent of all students who are referred to law enforcement or arrested– a 16-percentage point disparity, while White students represent 49 percent of student enrollment and they represent 36 percent of all students who were referred to law enforcement or arrested (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016).
African American children represent 19 percent of preschool enrollment, but 42 percent of the preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension, while White children represent 42 percent of preschool enrollment, but 30 percent of the preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016).

Disproportionality in suspension is correlated with patterns of lower academic achievement and higher rates of special education placements for the African American student, than what is typically found in populations of White students (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Rudd, 2014; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May & Tobin, 2011). These same students experience loss of instructional time, gaps in learning, increased dropout rates, experience with the juvenile justice system; all resulting in the long-standing achievement gap that is pervasive in our country (Losen & Whitaker, 2017; Skiba, 2013).

Voulgarides, Fergus, and Thorius (2017) asserted that research on disproportionate suspensions identifies patterns in which students who are African American are not only identified with a high-incidence disability (e.g., emotional disability, learning disability, or other health impairment) but also suspended more severely for the same infraction as their White counterparts. The same students are suspended more repeatedly, and most devastatingly, these patterns heighten the likelihood for youth to engage with the criminal justice system (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks & Booth, 2012; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggin-Aziz, and Chung (2005) also made a connection between suspension of students who are African American and identification into special education suggesting that rates of suspension and expulsion consistently predict district rates of special education identification disproportionality. As well, the relationships between special education identification disproportionality and achievement may indicate a developmental trend in a systemic contribution to racial disparities.

Big Valley, the school system that is the focus of this study, illustrates the magnitude of this problem through the following data in Table 2.

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Table 2

Big Valley Statistics of Disproportionality

In 2017, African American students represented 11.8 percent of enrollment and 31 percent of all suspensions as compared to White students representing 62 percent of the enrollment and 46 percent of all suspensions.
In 2018, African American students represented 12.3 percent of enrollment and 31 percent of all suspensions as compared to White students representing 60 percent of the enrollment and 45 percent of all suspensions.
African American students have been disproportionately identified into special education under the educational coding of emotionally disabled for the school year 2013 through the school year 2017; at a percentage of risk of 2.33 percent, 2.07 percent, 2.10 percent, 2.31 percent, and 2.05 percent respectively, as measured by a weighted risk ratio.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects in the research process as its unique application to the research problem presented in the study must be in relation to the theoretical framework (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Research of the Kirwan Institute (Rudd, 2014) suggested that implicit bias is implicated in every aspect of racial and ethnic inequality and injustice. One of the most powerful consequences of implicit racial bias is that it often robs us of a sense of compassion for and connection to individuals and groups who suffer the burdens of racial inequality and injustice in our society (Rudd, 2014). Implicit bias is an emerging phenomenon described as "deep-seated attitudes and stereotypes that affect our actions, our decisions, and our understanding, without us being conscious that it is happening" (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016, p. 10).

Research in social psychology suggested that people harbor implicit race biases; biases which can be unconscious or uncontrollable (Cameron, Payne, & Knobe, 2010; Fergus, 2017;

Lai, Hoffman, & Nosek, 2013; Lee, Lindquist, & Payne, 2018; Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010; Staats, 2016); however school staff that recognize their implicit bias show promise in identifying effective interventions to counteract the racial bias during vulnerable decision-making points, such as discipline or special education referral decisions (Staats, 2016).

African American students have experienced a differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein they are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation as a potential result of the teacher's implicit bias (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba et al., 2011). Researchers from the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, at Ohio State University, claimed a promising characteristic of implicit biases is that they are malleable; meaning our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit association that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques including replacing the bias with a non-biased decision-making pattern (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). Implications, because of this implicit bias phenomenon impact on decision-making, are for structural reform, teacher training, and effective instruction intervention, among other outcomes that would lead to eliminating disproportionality in suspension and special education identification (Fergus, 2017). Implicit bias phenomenon was the theoretical framework of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Disproportionality in suspension and special education identification has emerged for students as early as preschool through the primary grades (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014), yet there is limited research related to disproportionality in this age group. Rudd (2014) highlights a study that evidenced African American students as young as age five are routinely

suspended and expelled from schools for minor infractions like talking back to teachers or writing on their desks. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2019) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as "the policies and practices that push our nation's schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems." Even in preschools, disproportionate numbers of African American students receive out-of-school suspensions compared to their non-African American counterparts. It is commonly known that the treatment of children in early childhood has major implications for their development and trajectory into adolescent and even adulthood. The "preschool-to prison pipeline" paradigm for African American males has been conceptualized as a series of roadblocks and obstacles that hinder African American children from academic success but funnel them into the criminal justice system (Jones, S., 2017). While African Americans make up only about 15% of the general United States population, they are disproportionately locked up in jails and prisons across the country. A report by the U.S. Department of Education showed that 42% of African American preschoolers had been suspended at least once and 48% had been suspended on multiple occasions (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016).

Although these statistics for our earliest learners are most recently on the rise triggering states to implement bans on suspensions for these students, there are few studies of school discipline that have focused on the elementary level, and even fewer examined disproportionality across school levels (e.g., Fergus, 2017; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015; Rausch & Skiba, 2006). Early intervening to support young students' access to learning have evidenced far-reaching gains as they progress through school. Early childhood intervention programs are designed to mitigate the factors that place children at risk of poor outcomes (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005). Reynolds, Temple, & Robertson (2001) affirmed participation in an established

early childhood intervention for low-income children was associated with better educational and social outcomes up to age 20 years. These findings are strong evidence that established programs administered through public schools can promote children's long-term success. Further support, in a 2010 meta-analysis of the effects of early education interventions on cognitive and social development, "found positive effects for a range of outcomes, and this pattern is clearest for outcomes relating to cognitive development" (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan & Barnett, 2010, p. 579). Effective early childhood programs generate benefits to society that far exceed program costs. Harvard's Center on the Developing Child (2007), after four decades of evaluation research, have identified early intervening programs can improve a wide range of outcomes with continued impact into the adult years. Responsible investments focus on effective early intervention programs that are staffed appropriately, implemented well, and improved continuously. Extensive analysis by economists has shown that education and development investments in the earliest years of life produce the greatest returns. Most of those returns benefit the community through reduced crime, welfare, and educational remediation, as well as increased tax revenues on higher incomes for the participants of early childhood programs when they reach adulthood.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), under Part C, provide early intervening for students identified with disabilities (birth through age 2). In a review of the U.S. Department of Education EDFacts Data Warehouse (2015) the following data was reported. African American students are 20 percent less likely than all other racial and ethnic groups to receive such services. Among children ages 3 through 5, however, appearances of disparity disappear at the national level--African American children are just as likely as all other groups to receive services under IDEA, Part B. Once African American children begin grade school,

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disparities reappear: among students ages 6 through 21, African American students are 40 percent more likely to be identified with a disability than their peers, and more than twice as likely to be identified with an emotional disability (Harper, 2017). Harper (2017) indicated disparities in disability identification matter because the most common reason for special education referrals is child behavior. Researchers continue to clarify the relationship between how we perceive the behavior of African American students, how we identify education disabilities, and how we respond to the behaviors of African American students. As a result, a focus on the earliest learners is pivotal. If "the discipline gap between black and white students starts as early as preschool" (Gregory & Fergus, 2017, p. 119) and early intervening is key; it may be time to consider early intervention for this age group on a social-emotional and behavioral scale, like academics, to reduce this disproportionality at its inception.

Findings, such as the ones outlined before, have led policy makers and educators in school districts across the country to examine how best to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, especially for students from marginalized groups. Porowski, O'Conner, & Passa (2014) indicate there is a heightened focus on this disproportionality in discipline for race/ethnic minorities through federal and state legislation requiring school districts to investigate their discipline practices and resolve disproportionality. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) issued federal legislation, which focuses on equity by targeting widespread disparities in the treatment of students of color with disabilities. The legislation addresses issues related to significant disproportionality in the identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities based on race or ethnicity. Additionally, the legislation establishes a standard approach that states must use in determining whether significant disproportionality based on race or ethnicity is occurring and implement budgetary constraints upon local school systems, which

do not resolve disproportionality (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The legislation's parameters include all students starting at age 3 through age 21. The younger population is included for the first time, as it was not previously monitored by the federal government.

As well, states including Maryland, Tennessee and Arkansas have enacted legislation where students in elementary school cannot be suspended away from school, except for short periods of time, due to egregious incidents that pose an imminent threat; while other states, such as Colorado, Connecticut and Florida attempted to implement legislation related to suspension and expulsion and were unsuccessful (Educational Commission of the States, 2018). The issue regarding the aforementioned enacted legal mandates is they do not propose solutions or resources to fill the gap between not suspending early learners and proposing replacement interventions to increase instructional access for the young students.

The present study explored disproportionality in suspensions and special education identification within the primary elementary population and consider alternatives or interventions that can disrupt this disproportionality cycle that is pervasive across grade levels. Additionally, I investigated the ways that implicit bias influence decision-making in discipline and special education identification. The outcomes of this study highlighted concerns within Big Valley's data and further sought to inform policymakers in their allocation of resources with the goal of eliminating disproportionality; particularly at the early grades to prevent the persistent pattern of disproportionality for students who are African American. Recommendations from the study to administrators and teachers could improve classroom practices to encourage all student engagement in learning. As a result of the study, potential changes may lead to differences in students' access to instruction, lower rates of special education placements and lower rates of suspension and expulsion for students who are African American.
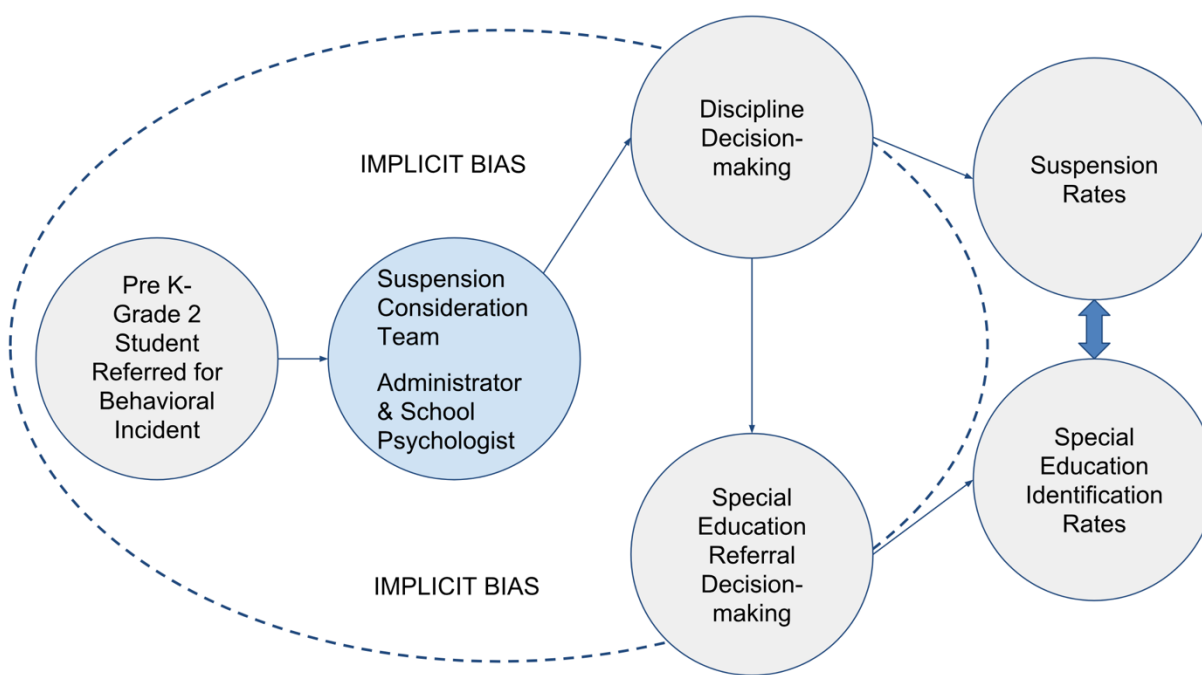
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is a key part of the design of the study. The conceptual framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories that supports and informs the research. Figure 1 outlines the conceptual framework of this study.

Students in pre-kindergarten through grade 2 are referred for a behavioral incident that is considered for suspension. The suspension consideration team, including an administrator and school psychologist implements the decision-making process to see if suspension is warranted. The center of the framework is a process or an act of compliance in reaction to the enacted legislation banning elementary suspension, but operating all the while in the background, largely

outside of their awareness, are the staff's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Their implicit bias in decision-making influences the process, and in-turn impacts suspension rates and special education identification rates. Research (e.g. Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017) identifies a connection between discipline and special education identification as emotionally disabled. Students who demonstrate a pattern of externalizing behaviors are more readily referred to special education (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung, 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Dr. Russell J. Skiba (2005), seminal researcher on disproportionate suspension and special education identification asserted the rates of suspension consistently predict rates of special education identification. This research study explored the center of the conceptual framework, from the people on the suspension consideration team and explored if the process implementation impacted suspension and special education identification rates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to explore disproportionality in suspensions and special education identification with the primary elementary population and consider alternatives or interventions that can disrupt this disproportionality cycle that is pervasive across grade levels, as well as investigate the ways in which implicit bias influences decision-making in these areas. The study investigated the effectiveness of the locally developed suspension consideration process. This study explored solutions to eliminate disproportionality in Big Valley, specifically at the early elementary grades, which include Pre-K through grade 2. It was a critical time in the educational process where persistent and pernicious patterns toward suspension and special

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education identification of African American students can be replaced with early interventions to support access to learning and disrupt the disproportionality cycle.

The following research question and sub-questions were the focus of this study:

Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?

1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?

2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?

3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students?

4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?

This locally developed suspension consideration process is implemented by elementary school teams, including a school administrator and school psychologist, when they are considering suspension for a Pre-K, kindergarten, grade 1 or grade 2 student. This process was developed in response to a state mandate enacted in July 2017, where students enrolled in a public Pre-K program, kindergarten, first grade or second grade may not be suspended or expelled. The law outlines that local education agencies are required to ensure that practice, policy, and local regulations related to suspensions and expulsions of students incorporate the provisions of the law. This means that a student may only be expelled from school if required by federal law or suspended for not more than five days if the school administration, in consultation

with the school psychologist or other mental health professionals, determines that there is an imminent threat of serious harm to other students or staff that cannot be reduced or eliminated through interventions or supports.

The decision-making process is recorded through a completed suspension consideration process student document. The study investigated the effect of the process on suspension and special education identification of students who are African American. Participants in Big Valley who implement the suspension consideration process partook in a semi-structured interview to yield further insight into the impact of suspension consideration process. The participants shared what influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2, what are their perceptions of the suspension consideration process about the fidelity of the program, its effectiveness in reducing suspension and how it can be improved, and in what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students.

Participants also partook in semi-structured focus groups where they reported on the fidelity to the suspension consideration process, discussed if it is a process that changes practices, and how the process can be improved. The focus groups participants discussed if implicit bias in discipline and special education referral decision-making is evident and provide further insight into recommended interventions that may reduce disproportionality and subsequent special education identification.

The completed suspension consideration process documents were analyzed. Aggregated suspension and special education identification data for school years 2017, 2018, and 2019 were also analyzed to discern the impact of the suspension consideration process.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant in adding to and building upon the limited research on disproportionality in suspension and special education identification beginning at the primary elementary grades (Pre-K-grade 2). Uncovering what influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2 yielded insight into changing the disproportionality cycle and the process itself to guide school teams in thoughtful decision-making. Digging deeper into staff perceptions who implement the process regarding the fidelity of the process, its effectiveness in reducing suspension and how it can be improved yielded opportunities to streamline the process on the local scale and to be an example on the larger state and national scale, as other states enact similar legislation where suspension for elementary school students are limited.

Additionally, uncovering the ways in which implicit bias influences decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American, Pre-K through grade 2 students, directly from the staff who make the decisions, illuminated the "why" behind the existing disproportionality. Practices in intentional recognition of implicit bias as the decision-making is unfolding and recommending alternatives to suspension benefits students who can access instruction without interruption. This outcome will result in families who are proud of their children staying in school and further encourage a culture of learning that is shared by students, school staff and the community. This outcome opens the door to future research implications around the impact of implicit bias and practical processes to ameliorate this bias to replace it with explicit, objective decision-making processes. Exploring the potential impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students will help the school system to outline

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what works well and what aspects of the process need attention. If the process evidences success in improved suspension and special education identification rates, requests for increased funding and human resources may be a consideration to continue and expand this trend beyond the primary elementary grades into middle and high school. This evidence supports teachers' buy in to providing alternatives to suspension for students as opposed to wanting the students out of their classroom and referring to special education.

Additionally, this deep dive into the human perspective of the staff implementing the process, yielded recommendations of resources and interventions to decrease the disproportionality and increase students' access to learning. If appropriate resources and interventions can be recommended early and implemented with fidelity at this age level, then the persistent and pernicious cycle of disproportionality can be broken for future African American students. Further research implications for evaluating the implementation of these resources and interventions are recommended from the study.

Research involving disproportionality in suspension and special education identification not only indicates a connection between the two (Skiba et al., 2005; Voulgarides, Fergus, and Thorius, 2017) but also highlights both over-identification (Skiba et al., 2011) and potential under-identification (Morgan, Farkas, Cook, Strassfeld, Hillemeier, Pun & Schussler. 2017) in these disproportionality foci across the nation. There are case studies, in prior research, that focus primarily on secondary education practices of disproportionality, showing not only the existence of the disparities but also some studies look specifically at the fidelity in implementation of interventions, such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) (Greflund, McIntosh, Mercer, & May, 2014; Sandomerowski. 2011), social emotional learning

interventions (Gregory & Fergus, 2017), and restorative practices (Kline, 2016). These studies evidence how the interventions correlate with lower levels of disproportionality more frequently.

This qualitative case study added to the current field of knowledge by exploring disproportionality in suspension and special education identification at the primary elementary grade levels through an examination of a process put into place in Big Valley as a result of a legal mandate to eliminate disproportionality in suspension, specifically in the primary elementary grades. In doing so, the outcomes informed practice moving forward to address significant disproportionality at the earliest grade levels.

Definition of Key Terms

Adverse Childhood Experiences-(ACEs) is the term used to describe all types of abuse, neglect, and other potentially traumatic experiences that occur to people under the age of 18.

Disability-The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has 13 disability codes including autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disability, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (including blindness) (IDEA. Retrieved from https://sites.ed.gov/idea/).

Discipline-School discipline is the system of rules, punishments and behavioral strategies appropriate to the regulation of children and the maintenance of order in schools. It aims to create a safe and conducive learning environment in the classroom (retrieved from https://www.pbis.org/).

Disproportionality- refers to the over-or under-representation of a given population group, often defined by racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also defined by socioeconomic status, national origin, English proficiency, gender, and sexual orientation. For this study, disproportionality will refer to overrepresentation of African Americans in suspension and special education identification.

*Implementation fidelity-*Refers to the degree to which an intervention is delivered as intended.

*Implicit Bias-*The bias in judgment and behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-*is a four-part (A-D) federal law that requires schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities which includes a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) that is tailored to their individual needs (retrieved from https://sites.ed.gov/idea/).

*Large mid-Atlantic Pre-K-12 school system-*a public school system, of approximately 44,000 students, located in the mid-Atlantic states, servicing students from Pre-K through grade 12 (pseudonym Big Valley).

*Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)-*A proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture and needed for all students in a school to achieve social, emotional and academic success (retrieved from https://www.pbis.org/).

Pre-referral Interventions-academic and behavior interventions recommended and documented by a team of professionals before moving forward to suspension or assessing for special education services (retrieved from https://www.pbis.org/).

Racial/Ethnic Status-The term race refers to groups of people who have differences and similarities in biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant, meaning that people treat other people differently because of them. The racial/ethnic status include the categories African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Two or more races, and White.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)-is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and an individual's or family's economic and social position about others, based on income, education, and occupation. For this study, FARMS (Free and Reduced-Price Meals) will be used to describe low SES students in public education (retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/education.aspx).

Suspension-In education, suspension (also known as temporary exclusion) is a mandatory leave assigned to a student as a form of punishment that can last anywhere from one day to multiple days, during which time the student is not allowed to attend regular school lessons.

Suspension Consideration Process -Big Valley's locally developed process where a team of professionals (including administrator and school-based mental health professional) at the elementary level discerns if suspension is warranted for students in grades pre-kindergarten through second grade per each suspension consideration after consideration of attempting a list

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of interventions. This process was developed in October 2017 and fully implemented in Big

Valley in January 2018 in response to a state mandate issued in July 2017.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This review of literature includes relevant studies, benchmark studies, and informational texts relevant to disproportionality in both discipline and special education identification. Section one of this literature review outlined the overall historical background on disproportionality. In the following sections, I reviewed literature on discipline disproportionality, special education identification disproportionality, how disproportionality is measured, the association between discipline and special education identification disproportionality, implicit bias and its prospective relationship with disproportionality, the different programs and approaches implemented to address disproportionality, and policy impact on disproportionality particularly for early in the elementary students.

In ordering the literature review as such, I provided background information related to the purpose of my study. I highlighted the literature that supports the existence of disproportionality in suspension and special education identification of African American students, as well as outlined where the two disproportionalities correlate with one another. Because disproportionality in suspension and special education identification has emerged for students as early as preschool through the primary grades (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014) and there is limited research related to disproportionality in this age group as well as, why it is happening, I outlined the literature in this area.

This study investigated the locally developed process of consideration of suspension of Pre-K through grade 2 students. The intention of the study was to learn about the process' impact on reducing disproportionality in suspension and special education identification for African

American students. Additionally, the theoretical framework of implicit bias in discipline and special education decision-making is outlined next in the literature review, as I looked at the ways in which implicit bias influences decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students. Looking at programs and approaches to address disproportionality helped to know what programs are available and effective in eliminating disproportionality. Finally, policy drives a system approach to decision-making. Outlining the existing chronology of policy related to disproportionality, specifically policy related to primary elementary learners, is the last section of the literature review. Understanding the disproportionality literature and these policies, specifically related to our earliest learners, informed next steps in reducing disproportionality.

Historical Background of Disproportionality

Although concerns about racial disproportionality go back to the 1970s when the Children's Defense Fund (1975) published a report on disparities in suspensions for children of color, it was not until the late 1990s that the issue began to attract wider notice. The current wave of reform has been field-driven in multiple ways. Civil rights advocates, those in the education field, and even parents began documenting growing rates of suspension, expulsion and arrests in schools, and their disproportionate impact on African American students, using the term *school-to-prison* pipeline to describe a pattern of educational exclusion and justice system involvement (Ginwright, 2004; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011)

The growing rates of suspension, expulsion, and arrests in school lends itself to the persistent poor academic performance of African American students, particularly males. Despite some progress toward closing the achievement gap among racial and ethnic groups, the most

recent assessments from 2017 reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that reading and math gaps are still substantial for African American students, with males showing the greatest disparities.

The U.S. Departments of Justice and Education launched the national Supportive School Discipline Initiative to improve data collection, expand technical assistance, and inform reform efforts by state and local officials (U.S. Department of Justice/Department of Education, 2011). In January 2014, the two agencies jointly released a two-part federal guidance document with recommended practices for fostering supportive and equitable school discipline. In 2015, Congress passed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA S. 1177), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary School Act and included a number of provisions intended to reduce disparities in disciplinary exclusion.

For decades, research and advocacy were establishing that exclusionary discipline in U.S. public schools constituted a problem of serious proportion (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017). Faced with evidence of widespread use of these sanctions and the extreme disparities noted for students of color, policymakers implemented national, state, and local initiatives to reduce rates of suspension and expulsion and increase the use of alternatives (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014).

Discipline Disproportionality

Although the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights announced in 2016 that the number of suspensions and expulsions in the nation's public schools had dropped 20 percent between 2012 and 2014, researchers still contended that suspensions are doled out in a

biased way because African American students and students with disabilities continue to receive a disproportionate share of the suspensions (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Disproportionately suspending African American students away from school has been extensively documented in literature that shows a relationship between race/ethnic status and suspension rates; yet the reasons for the disparities are less well understood (e.g., Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Bean, 2013; Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gregory, Lombardo & Turner, 2018; Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). This broad documentation is mostly because research highlighted that this practice results in negative outcomes including: higher rates of special education identification, experience with the juvenile justice system, and an increase in school dropout rate; which collectively widens the achievement gap that is endemic in public education (e.g., Fabelo et al., 2011; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Losen & Whitaker, 2017; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Rudd, 2014; Skiba, 2013; Skiba, et al., 2011).

Ruck & Wortley (2002) found that over time, African American students recognize these documented disparities in disciplinary treatment, view them as discriminatory and unjust, and often perceive school negatively as a result. Additionally, it has been documented, as students' progress through their education; suspension in high school increases the rate of dropping out by at least 12 percent (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, and Girwan (2018) offered solutions for when they suggest given the negative effects of exclusionary discipline on a range of student outcomes (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013), educators should address the issue by identifying rates of discipline disproportionality, taking steps to reduce it, and monitoring the effects of intervention on disproportionality.

The research on disproportionality provides a range of factors affecting this outcome. There is growing evidence showing that suspending or expelling students from school for misconduct can harm their academic progress because of a loss of instructional time (e.g., Losen & Whitaker, 2017; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015; Rausch & Skiba, 2006). It is also clear that students' race and gender play a role in how school discipline is doled out. Statistical comparisons of students who have been referred for discipline for similar reasons (like fighting) show that African American students and male students are more likely to receive out-of-school suspension than White students and the female population (Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Skiba, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) also recognized the discipline disparity and related it to the role that bias may or may not play in decision-making by stating,

> "Statistical disproportionality, in and of itself, is not a certain indicator of discrimination or bias; while certain conditions, such as more severe punishments for black students, or punishment for less serious behavior, would suggest bias in the administration of school discipline, under other conditions (e.g., high levels of disruptive behavior on the part of the African American students) disproportionality would probably not represent discrimination" (p. 321).

One line of disproportionality inquiry focused on the types of student-level demographics (i.e. gender, race, parent educational level, eligibility for free and reduced lunch programs) and school-level factors (i.e. enrollment, racial and linguistic makeup of the student body, retention rate, dropout rate, teacher demographics, mean academic performance and community setting) that are predictive of the presence and intensity of disproportionality in suspension (Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013). For example, Beck and Mushkin (2012) identified student-level demographic factors as explanatory variables of disciplinary infractions. In addition, they cited that academic differences encompass the largest racial difference contributing to behavioral infractions. Moreover, Bryan, Day-Vine, Griffin, and Moore-Thomas (2012) identified the

variables of students' race, gender, and teachers' postsecondary expectations as predictors of behavioral referrals. These studies and others relied on aggregate school or district level data and did not connect the actual student infractions to the disciplinary consequences (e.g., Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Losen, Hodson, Morrison, & Beltway, 2015; Losen & Skiba, 2010, Sullivan et al., 2013); although informative, they did not uncover if students are being treated unfairly.

Some more frequent studies did utilize student-level or infraction-level datasets to address a more important issue: whether particular groups of students are treated differently for committing the same type of infraction (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya, &Hughes, 2014). For example, Skiba et al. (2014), in a multilevel modeling approach, identified the varying influence of infraction type on individual and school-level characteristics in out-of-school suspensions. The most salient disproportionality findings included those that show that schools with higher proportions of African American students contribute to the out-of-school suspension rates and that systemic school level variables, such as enrollment, racial and linguistic makeup of the student body, retention rate, dropout rate, teacher demographics, mean academic performance and community setting were more important in determining the overrepresentation of African Americans in suspension (Fergus, 2017). Anderson and Ritter (2017) concluded similarly that schools with larger proportions of non-White students tend to give out longer punishments regardless of school income levels measured by free and reduced lunch rates. In fact, African American students are often punished more severely for the same offense as their White counterparts (e.g., Johnson, Boyden & Pitz, 2001; Lomabardo & Turner, 2018; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Rudd, 2014) and less likely to be offered "mild disciplinary alternatives" by school administrators (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 319).

Research on exploring the nature of the problem of disproportionality has also positioned its association with the juvenile justice system. Fabelo et al. (2011) highlighted, through an extensive multivariate regression analysis, the effect of school and student-level social demographic variables, and the trajectory of the most vulnerable populations, which based on the analysis are African American males identified into special education. Other research in the school and juvenile justice connection supported this conclusion (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009).

Much of the extensive literature regarding disproportionality in discipline tried to pinpoint which variables are predictors of suspension and which variables can be ruled in or ruled out as influencing suspension rates. Skiba et al. (2011), using a national data set of elementary through middle school, find that African Americans are overrepresented in disciplinary actions as compared to their non-African American peers. They noted in order for race to become a socially neutral factor in education, all levels of our educational system must be willing to make a significant investment devoted explicitly to altering currently inequitable discipline patterns. This change would ensure that our instructional and disciplinary systems afford all children an equal opportunity for school learning (Skiba et al., 2011).

Moreover, African American students remain overrepresented in school discipline exclusionary practices after accounting for their achievement, socioeconomic status, and teacher and self-reported behavior (e.g. Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan & Leaf, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011, Finn and Servoss, 2015). The Government Accountability Office found African American students, boys, and students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined in K-12 schools across the country, as reported from a non-partisan federal watchdog group who was assigned to

study disparate discipline (Lombardo & Turner, 2018). According to the study, those disparities were consistent regardless of the type of disciplinary action, regardless of the level of school poverty, and regardless of the type of public school attended (Lombardo & Turner, 2018).

Not only does the literature outline that suspensions are counter-productive to school and individual student outcomes, they appear discriminatory in their application on the surface: African American students are suspended at nearly three times the rate as White students, even in preschool (e.g., Civil Rights Data; 2013-2014; Fabelo et al., 2011; Lewin, 2012; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba, 2013). The higher suspension rates for African American students (particularly African American boys) has little to do with them committing more offenses or more severe offenses (e.g., Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014). Skiba et al. (2002) provided evidence that African Americans do not "misbehave at significantly higher rates" than White students and that the "racial disparities in school punishment are not explained by higher rates of African American misbehavior" (p. 322, 224). Moreover, even after the researchers considered other variables, such as poverty, African American students in poverty are still suspended more than White students in poverty (e.g., Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016; Skiba et al., 2002; Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Nortnan, 2013). Across elementary, middle and high schools, African American students did not commit serious infractions at higher rates; it was the subjective offenses (e.g., disruption, disobedience, disrespect) where racial differences most appeared (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). In 2008, the American Psychological Association said this about school suspensions: "There is no data showing that out-of-school suspension or expulsion reduce rates of disruption or improve school climate; indeed, the available data suggest that, if anything, disciplinary removal appears to have

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negative effects on student outcomes and the learning climate" (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Further, the evidence on alternative strategies to disciplinary exclusion was mainly correlational, and suggested that more research is necessary to uncover how alternative approaches to suspensions affect school safety and student outcomes (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). It is evident, that disproportionality in suspension of African Americans is a topic that requires further investigation; although this disproportionality in discipline outcomes exists, the reasons why are less clear.

Special Education Identification Disproportionality

The first look at the problem of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education is often traced back to Dunn's (1968) classic critique of the field. Dunn (1968) suggested that the overrepresentation of ethnic and language minority students in self-contained special education classrooms raised significant civil rights and educational concerns. The debate surrounding disproportionality in special education identification of students who are African American and in the category of emotional disability in particular, remains highly contentious. Researchers continue to wrestle with the process of making meaning of these observed patterns of representation and their related outcomes, as well as conceptualizing why it is happening and determining the resulting implications for policy and practice (Sullivan, 2017). The body of research confirmed that students who are African American are being identified for special education as emotionally disabled at higher rates than their peers (e.g., Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), African American students were 2.28

times more likely than school age peers in other racial/ethnic categories to be served in special education as emotionally disabled.

The statistics of overall special education identification by race were interesting to note because students who are African American were overrepresented in special education enrollment at 19.1% when their total enrollment was only 15.8%. This overrepresentation is more significant than any other race category. The National Center for Education Statistics (2011-2012) outlined that among 50 million total students enrolled in public schools, the racial/ethnic enrollment is by total enrollment and special educational enrollment is outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3

National Center for Education Statistics Racial/Ethnic and Special Education Enrollment

Race/Ethnic Status	Total Enrollment	Special Education Enrollment
White	51.7%	53.1%
Hispanic	23.7%	21.3%
African American	15.8%	19.1%
Asian	4.7%	2.3%
Native American	1.1%	1.5%

However, enrollment in special education differed greatly from the national overall enrollment patterns, specifically for African Americans. Among the approximately 6 million students with disabilities in school year 2012, the distribution noted in Table 3 is distinct across race/ethnicity and gender groups. Students who are African American are the only student group whose special education enrollment exceeds their total enrollment by 3.2 percent.

The overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs for students with high incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, and intellectual disabilities is outlined in an abundance of literature (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Blanchett, 2006; Harry and Anderson, 1994; Harry & Klinger, 2014; Obi & Obiakor, 2001; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Blanchett (2006) asserted these high incidence disability identifications typically are made by school staff "relying on a subjective referral and eligibility determination process that varies from district to district and school to school within a district" (p. 23). Because the identifications of students into these high incidence disability categories were subjective and varied across settings and across staff who made the referrals, misdiagnosis and disproportionality occurred more often (Blanchett, 2006). Much of the literature is replete with causal factors in disproportionate special education identification that range from failure of the general education system to inequities associated with the special education referral, assessment, and placement processes (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry and Anderson, 1994; Harry & Klinger, 2014; Obi & Obiakor, 2001; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Townsend, Thomas, Witty & Lee, 1996).

To add to this disproportionality cycle, Skiba et al. (2008) indicated the teacher subjective assessment of the student behavior often led to special education referrals. The

researchers cautioned if these referrals are accurate, then prevention and intervention efforts should be targeted for improved outcomes for the student; however, if these referrals are inaccurate, then school systems and teachers need to re-evaluate how those assessments are made and if implicit bias impacts the decision-making. This disproportionality, the overrepresentation of African Americans students identified with emotional disabilities, was due to referrals for identification by primarily White, middle class teachers because of the students demonstrating externalizing behaviors that are perceived as disruptive to the classroom (Skiba et al., 2008).

As previously discussed, African American students are disproportionality identified with disabilities associated with externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, hyperactivity, and oppositional defiance, and consequently are more frequently placed in special education. With African American students being more likely to be identified with an emotional disability and overrepresented in special education, the manifestation of their behavior (e.g. aggression, oppositional defiance, and other disruptive behavior) can cause interruptions to learning and separation from their peers as a result of special education identification and disciplinary actions (Bean, 2013).

Cartledge and Dukes (2009) noted "not only are African American students overrepresented in special education programs, they also tend to receive the most restrictive educational placements" (p. 384). Likewise, Bussing, Porter, Zima, Mason, Garvin, and Reid (2010) indicated African American students who are identified into special education as emotionally disabled, that demonstrate externalizing behaviors, have the highest rates of removal to an alternative educational setting, such as more restrictive special education placements. Research reported that this removal from mainstream education is associated with negative outcomes such as the stigma of being in special education and poor educational outcomes as a

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result of lowered expectations (Bussing et al., 2010).

Opposite to the overrepresentation argument, in 2017, Morgan et al. completed a meta-analysis of studies to evaluate if African American students were disproportionately overrepresented in special education. This study garnered national attention. These findings were unexpected in the field and were juxtaposed to the regular pattern of overrepresentation that had been reported long standing. Their findings indicated the evidence of overrepresentation declined markedly as the studies included one or more of three "best-evidence" methodological features determined by the researchers to include: analyses of individual-level data, a nationally representative sample, a control for individual-level academic achievement. Instead, African American students were significantly less likely than otherwise similar White students to receive special education services (Morgan et al., 2017). This is the most recent study of its kind that questioned the disproportionate overrepresentation argument. This study was a multivariate regression analysis of many studies, where the researchers selected variables they considered "best practice." Morgan and Farkas (2017) argued among children displaying the same level of need, White children were more likely to get services and to the researchers that is indicative of inequity. Nevertheless, the national statistics demonstrated disproportionality in identification of African Americans into special education. The fact remains that overrepresentation happens often enough that the federal government is correct to guard against it (e.g., Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011, Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017; United States Department of Education, 2018).

While the majority of the research in disproportionate special education identification of African Americans in high incidence disabilities points to reasons that include special education eligibility and the special education placement process being highly subjective (Blanchett, 2006),

students are often referred to special education without sufficient exposure to high-quality interventions to support their learning and social emotional needs (e.g., Bean 2013; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Harris-Murray, King & Rostenberg, 2006). There was a cultural dissonance and mismatch between practitioners and families where the kind of services offered to students are often of lower quality and shrouded in low expectations and misunderstanding, as well, teachers may hold implicit, preconceived notions about particular racial and ethnic groups of students that they may subconsciously apply to the students when looking at their behavior (Skiba et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2017). Other research highlights a connection between both discipline and special education identification disproportionality. Sullivan and Bal (2013) examined the risk of disability identification associated with individual and school variables where their sample included 18,000 students in 39 schools in an urban K-12 school system. While they found that racial minority risk varied across seven disability categories, where males and students accessing Free and Reduced Lunch programs were at the highest risk in most disability categories, the most consistent predictors of identification across categories were students' gender, race, socioeconomic status, and number of suspensions (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). In summary, disproportionality in special education identification, especially African American students identified as emotionally disabled has been widely studied. While the studies indicated the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, the reasons for this phenomenon are not only multileveled but also lack clarity regarding the reasons why disproportionality in special education identification is happening. Understanding how the disproportionality is measured further clarifies this phenomenon.

      measurement of disproportionality. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) reported there is no standard method for characterizing or calculating overrepresentation in school

discipline or special education identification. The United States Department of Education (2018)

also recognized that there were no standards for disproportionality measurements across the

states so they proposed new methodology to be standard for all states. The methods used

commonly by jurisdictions, researchers, policy analysts and advocates to measure discipline

disparities varied widely. Each method shares a different story or perspective about the impact of

disciplinary practices on student outcomes. Skiba et al. (2002) highlighted that how the

indicators of discipline disparities are used is not uniform as they may be derived from different

formulas (e.g., risk ratio vs risk gap), generated by different types of data (e.g., infraction-level

vs. student-level), sensitive to contextual factors (e.g., homogeneous vs heterogeneous student

populations), disaggregated differently (e.g., by race/ethnicity vs by race/ethnicity, gender and

disability status), and/or reported differently (e.g., school-level vs district-level). Consequently,

the choice of indicator affects what questions can and cannot be answered about a school's

disciplinary practices and can lead to different findings about the degree to which

disproportionality exists in a given educational setting (Skiba et al. 2002).

Disproportionality is most often measured with the relative risk statistic, a measure that

indicates the probability of a certain event, in this case out-of-school suspension, for one student

group when compared to all other student groups (Sanzone, 2017). Sanzone (2017) shares that a

simplified version of the formula is the percent of African American students receiving an out-

of-school suspension, divided by the percent of all other students receiving an out-of-school

suspension. Federal and state government, as well as local school districts use some iteration of

the relative risk statistic.

A variety of measures has been used to assess racial/ethnic disproportionality in the field

of special education, particularly special education identification (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000;

Hosp & Reschly, 2003; National Research Council, 2002). The more common measures are composition, risk, and the risk ratio. Sometimes these measures are used alone; other times, two or more measures are used in combination because each of these measures represents a different way of reporting the same data and each answers a different question about racial/ethnic representation in special education (Roy, 2012).

Bollmer et al. (2007) shares the first measure is a calculation of the racial/ethnic composition of a given disability category (e.g., the percentage of the category that is African American). Composition answers the question, what percentage of students receiving special education and related services for a particular disability are from a specific racial/ethnic group? To assess disproportionality, the racial/ethnic composition of the disability category is typically compared to the racial/ethnic composition of the total student enrollment to determine whether they are similar.

Risk measures the probability that students of a given racial/ethnic group will be identified as having a particular disability. Risk answers the question, what percentage of students from a specific racial/ethnic group receive special education and related services for a particular disability? To assess disproportionality, the risk for a particular racial/ethnic group must be compared to the risk for a comparison group. Typically, this comparison is made using a risk ratio. The risk ratio compares a racial/ethnic group's risk of receiving special education and related services to the risk for a comparison group. It answers the question, what is a specific racial/ethnic group's risk of receiving special education and related services for a particular disability as compared to the risk for all other students? A risk ratio of 1.00 indicates no difference between the racial/ethnic group and the comparison group. In other words, the racial/ethnic group is no more likely than are students from all other racial/ethnic groups to

receive special education and related services for a particular disability. A risk ratio greater than 1.00 indicates that the risk for the racial/ethnic group is greater than the risk for the comparison group is, whereas a risk ratio less than 1.00 indicates that the risk for the racial/ethnic group is less than the risk for the comparison group is. The advantage of the risk ratio over other measures is that it is easier to interpret when used alone (Bollmer et al., 2007). For example, the risk index for one racial/ethnic group is only meaningful when compared with risks for other groups, since there is no established norm for risk of disability, and there tends to be a correlation between risk of identification for different demographic groups, at least when state-level data are considered (Westat, 2003). Similarly, the racial/ethnic composition of the disability category must be compared with the underlying demographic distribution to assess the extent of disproportionality. The risk ratio provides a unitless measure that can be evaluated without reference to other data (Roy, 2012).

Where Discipline and Special Education Identification Disproportionality Intersect

There is a noted connection between discipline disproportionality and special education identification disproportionality. It is the premise of all public education and subsequent policies that schools are safe and students learn. School-wide disciplinary practices are necessary for order and safety, as well as maintaining control of students in schools so that learning is possible (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The Individuals with Disabilities Education: Improvement Act (IDEA) contains provisions bringing together all of the regulations that apply to students with disabilities faced with disciplinary actions. These provisions were intended to bring a "balanced approach to the issue of discipline of children with disabilities that reflects the need

for orderly and safe schools and the need to protect the right of children with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education" (Office of Special Education Programs, 1995).

African Americans with and without disabilities are overrepresented in school disciplinary sanctions compared to their enrollment rates across the United States (Children's Defense Funds, 1975; Skiba et al., 2008). Data on the discipline of students with disabilities is not extensive, yet most studies find that students with disabilities typically represent between 11 percent and 14 percent of the total school, district, or state but represent between 20 percent and 24 percent of the suspended and expelled populations (e.g., Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014; Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016; Leone, Mayer, Malmgren & Meisel, 2000).

Rausch and Skiba (2006) found that students who were identified with an emotional disability (ED) were at a high risk to be referred to the office, suspended or expelled. Similarly, Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein & Sumi (2005) conducted a nationally representative study on students with ED and found that 47 percent of elementary and middle school, and 72.9 percent of high school students with ED reported being suspended or expelled. These percentages were significantly higher than student with non-ED disabilities, in which 11.7 percent students at the elementary/middle school level and 27.6 percent of students at the secondary school level reported being suspended or expelled (Wagner, et al., 2005).

There are very few studies, which have examined the extent of racial disparity in discipline within the disabled student population, but of these studies over time, all have shown that African American students with a disability are more likely to be suspended or expelled when compared to other students. McFadden, Marsh, Prince, and Hwang (1992) found that African American students with a disability were more likely to receive office referrals, corporal

punishments, and out-of-school suspension, and less likely to receive milder punishments (e.g. student conferences) when compared to other students with disabilities. In a state report on minority disproportionality in special education and school discipline in the state of Indiana, African American students made up 12 percent of the special education population but accounted for 22 percent of students receiving at least one of the special disciplinary provisions stipulated by IDEA (Skiba, Wu, Kohler, Chung & Simmons 2001).

Other research has shown a link to referral to special education as a result of the disciplinary actions. Gregory and Weinstein, (2008) affirmed that not only did African American students in general and special education, especially those with emotional disabilities, receive higher rates of suspension, expulsion and office disciplinary referrals but these students were also more likely to be referred to special education and the juvenile justice system and were consequently, excluded from the general education curriculum. This and other studies claimed the connection of disparate discipline practices and subsequent special education referral (e.g., Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al. 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Likewise, Harris-Murray, King & Rostenberg (2006) concluded in their discussions that African American students who experience discipline exclusion due to disruptive, externalizing behaviors were more likely to be referred to special education more readily, as a solution, because there is not a hierarchy of general education behavioral intervention to meet the need of these students.

Research on disproportionate suspensions identified patterns in which African American students were not only identified with a high incidence disability (Voulgarides, Fergus, & Thomas, 2017) but also suspended more severely for the same infraction as their White counterparts; these rates of suspension consistently predicted rates of special education

identification (Skiba et al., 2005). In summary, the current research base on the discipline of students with disabilities is limited; therefore, the following conclusions should be interpreted with caution:

- Students with disabilities are typically disciplined more often than expected based on their proportion in the overall enrollment, and at rates higher than general education students, although this finding is not entirely consistent (e.g., Children's Defense Funds, 1975; Leone, et al., 2000; McFadden, Marsh, Prince, and Hwang, 1992; Civil Rights Data Collection 2015-2016; Skiba et al., 2008).

- Students identified with an emotional disability who demonstrate externalizing behaviors are at a high risk of being disciplined compared to other students with and without a disability (Gregory and Weinstein, 2008; Harris-Murray, King & Rostenberg, 2006).

- African American students with a disability are more likely to be disciplined compared to other students with a disability (McFadden, Marsh, Prince, and Hwang, 1992; Skiba et al., 2001).

- Students who are African American are being identified for special education as emotionally disabled at higher rates than their peers (e.g., Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017; US Department of Education, 2008).

- African American students who demonstrate disruptive, externalizing behaviors are more likely to be referred to special education (e.g., Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

- Rates of suspension of African American students consistently predict rates of special education disproportionality (Skiba et al., 2005).

Implicit Bias Phenomenon

In discussing factors contributing to disproportionality, issues of racial bias and institutional racism come to the forefront. This is a particularly delicate debate, as the topic of discrimination and racism is difficult to broach, particularly when considering its impact on our youngest learners. Much of the literature related to disproportionality (e.g., Cameron, Payne, & Knobe, 2010; Fergus, 2016; Lai, Hoffman, & Nosek, 2013; Lee, Lindquist, & Payne, 2018; Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010; Staats, 2016) emphasized contributing factors may include implicit bias in decision-making. Implicit bias refers to bias in judgment and behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). While disparities in school discipline by race and disability status have been well documented, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether or not these disparate practices involve racial bias and discrimination, although many studies have attempted to show a correlation between the two (e.g., Cameron, Payne, & Knobe, 2010; Fergus, 2016; Gilliam, et al., 2016; Ginwright 2004; Lai, Hoffman, & Nosek, 2013; Lee, Lindquist, & Payne, 2018).

Rudd (2014) asserted implicit bias is heavily implicated as a contributing factor when the causes of racial disproportionality in school discipline are analyzed. In this context, implicit bias is defined as the mental process that causes us to have negative feelings and attitudes about people based on characteristics like race, ethnicity, and appearance. These negative feelings are

unconscious, not readily noticed on the surface. Because this cognitive process functions in our unconscious mind, we are typically not consciously aware of the negative racial biases that we develop over the course of our lifetime. Since the implicit associations we hold arise outside of conscious awareness, implicit biases do not necessarily align with our explicit beliefs and stated intentions (Rudd, 2014).

Further research on implicit bias has identified several conditions in which individuals rely on their unconscious associations in situations that involve ambiguous or incomplete information; the presence of time constraints; and circumstances in which our cognitive control may be compromised. Staats (2016) stated that school staff are faced with many, if not all, of the aforementioned conditions through the course of a school day and it is understandable that implicit biases may be contributing to school staff decisions.

Culturally, over the past decade, racial unrest is in the media spotlight with incidences related to police violence against certain race/ethnic status minorities, among other current events highlighting racial tensions. These issues perpetuate the phenomenon of implicit racial bias as a potential correlation factor. Further, it should be noted that researchers asserted "implicit racial bias often supports the stereotypical caricature of African American youth—especially males—as irresponsible, dishonest, and dangerous" (Rudd, 2014, p. 3) which influence African American students school outcomes. The implicit bias influence exists even when explicit beliefs of school staff contradict these views, as can see by the disproportionality statistics.

A study by Smolkowski, et al. (2016) investigated the vulnerable decision points that elicit implicit bias in teachers and administrators where there is increased racial and gender

disproportionality for subjectively defined behaviors, in classrooms, and for incidents classified as more severe. This study was implemented at the elementary level and looked at which certain situations are more vulnerable to the effects of implicit bias. Although the behaviors of children may impact adult decision-making processes, implicit biases about sex and race may influence how those behaviors are perceived and how they are addressed, creating a vicious cycle, over time, exacerbating inequalities (Okonofua, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016; Smolkowski, et al., 2016).

Implicit bias was evident in the outcomes of a study out of Yale University in 2016. This study is of particular interest as the focus was on preschool teachers and students. Gilliam et al. (2016) investigated preschool teachers and their propensity to look for disruptive behaviors. The research included 135 Pre-Kindergarten teachers who were recruited to watch a few short videos. Each video included four children: an African American boy and girl and a White boy and girl. As the teachers watched the videos, eye-scan technology tracked where and what they were watching. The teachers did not know going into the experiment that no challenging behavior was displayed, even though researchers told them it may or may not be there. The goal of the research was to determine when teachers expected bad behavior, which students did they watch. The researchers found based on the rates at which children are expelled from preschool programs and the outcomes of the eye scans, teachers looked more at the African American children than the White children, and they looked specifically at the African American boy. These outcomes pointed to implicit bias as a correlational factor (Gilliam, et al., 2016).

Steinberg and Lacoe (2017) conducted a study using nationally representative longitudinal survey data, which gave different outcomes regarding bias. This study considered

the role of prior problems in behavior in disparate suspension rates. When the study authors controlled for whether these students exhibited prior behavioral problems (in kindergarten, 1st and 3rd grades), they found that the racial gap in 8th grade suspension rates disappeared, leading them to conclude that the disproportionate use of suspensions was probably not the result of racial bias. This conclusion is subject to question, however, since the authors compared results from statistical models that relied on different underlying samples, owing to student attrition within the study. Further, the study was unable to address any biases implicit in the measure of prior behavioral problems; nor did it consider that a child might be labeled as a "troublemaker" early on, which might predispose authorities to dole out harsher consequences (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

Implicit bias was further emphasized in a study by Tajalli and Garba (2014) where they investigated overrepresentation of minority students in disciplinary alternative education programs to discern the underlying factor of bias contributing to this problem. The data represented more than 62 percent of the student population of Texas school districts. Results supported the hypothesis that the "whiteness" of the school district undesirably affected the representation of African American students in alternative education programs as a result of disciplinary outcomes. The researchers contended that predominantly White school districts were more likely than other districts to exercise their "discretionary" authority to punish minorities, but they also more frequently subject their minority students to "mandatory" disciplines that are well defined by the state. This study pointed to implicit or explicit biased decision-making (Tajalli & Garba, 2014).

Implicit attitudes toward specific racial groups can unconsciously affect disciplinary

decisions. In 2015, a study out of Stanford University shed further light on the dynamic of

implicit bias by highlighting how racial disparities in discipline can occur even when African

American students and White students behave similarly (Okonofua & Eberhardt). In this

experiment, researchers showed a racially diverse group of female K-12 teachers the school

records of fictitious middle school student who had misbehaved twice; both infractions were

minor and unrelated. Requesting that the teachers imagine working at this school, the researchers

asked a range of questions related to how teachers perceived and would respond to the student's

infractions. While the student discipline scenarios were identical, the names of the students were

changed; some teachers reviewed records of a student given stereotypical African American

name and others reviewed the records of a student given a stereotypical White name. The results

indicated that teachers were more likely to escalate the disciplinary response to the second

infraction when the student was perceived to be African American as opposed to White

(Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Existing research suggests also that implicit racial bias may influence a teacher's

expectations for academic success. For example, Tenenbaum & Ruck (2007) completed a meta-

analysis of research found statistically significant evidence that teachers hold lower expectations,

either implicitly or explicitly, or both, for African American and Hispanic students compared to

White students. In a 2002 study, researchers used a sample of 561 elementary school children to

determine if a student's race or ethnicity played a role in their susceptibility to teacher

expectations (McKown & Weinstein). The researchers conceptualized teacher expectations to the

degree by which teachers over- or under-estimated achievement compared to the students' actual

academic performance; they found that African American students are more likely than White

students "to confirm teacher underestimates of ability and less likely to benefit from teacher overestimates of ability" (McKown & Westen, 2002, p. 176). These researchers concluded lowered expectations in the classroom might result in a differential treatment for African American students, including less praise, more disciplinary action from teachers and more referrals to special education (McKown & Weinstein, 2002).

In a supplementary paper for *The Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative*, Wald (2014) argued a strong case for implicit bias as a determinant for the racial disparities evident in school disciplinary data and in special education identification. The study reviewed the literature on race-dependent differences in school's punishment practices and how implicit bias can lead to this differential treatment. It was concluded with practical steps to reduce one's biases in decision-making and calls on the education system to develop more comprehensive solutions for decreasing the discipline gap, as well as the disproportionate identification into special education, disparate practices could be reduced (Wald, 2014). In conclusion, researchers in the field of implicit bias phenomenon (e.g., Cameron, Payne, & Knobe, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gilliam et al., 2016; Lai, Hoffman, & Nosek, 2013; Lee, Lindquist, & Payne, 2018; Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010; Rudd, 2014; Staats, 2016) indicated it is evidenced in educational decision-making, specifically leading to discipline and special education identification disproportionality.

Programs and Approaches to Address Disproportionality

In response to the U.S. Department of Education (2016) issuance of federal legislation, many school systems have implemented programs and approaches to address disproportionality

in an effort to reduce it and implement alternatives to suspension. Table 4 outlines the programs

and approaches that address disproportionality.

Table 4

Programs and Approaches to Address Disproportionality

Program	Description
Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)	positive behavior framework that is preventative, multi-tiered, and culturally responsive
Social Skills Instruction	culturally relevant instruction that is personalized using situations, materials and practice exercises that reflected the students' experiences and backgrounds to learn to interact socially
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs	social-emotional oriented approaches to behavior as an intervention
Response to Intervention (RTI) for behavior	provide services to specific students, with the goal of preventing further behavior problems where the intervention is tailored to the student and if the student does not respond, a more intensive intervention is tried
Restorative Justice (RJ)	uses peaceful and nonpunitive approaches to address misbehavior and solve problems and resolve conflict in school and prevent future harm

McIntosh et al. (2018) highlighted the components of effective intervention to prevent and reduce disproportionality, which included implementing a behavior framework that is preventative, multi-tiered, and culturally responsive. They expressed that although implementing Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) without specific attention to student culture may reduce rates of exclusionary discipline, it is unlikely it will reduce discipline disparities. Recent studies have shown decreased discipline disparities over time for schools who implement PBIS (Betters-Bubon, Brunner, & Kansteiner, 2016; McIntosh, et al., 2018).

McIntosh et al. (2018) also included teaching strategies for neutralizing implicit bias in disciplinary decisions as a component of effective intervention to prevent and reduce disproportionality. In these situations, using a self-review routine just prior to making discipline decisions may neutralize the effects of implicit bias, especially in situations that are chaotic, ambiguous, or seem to demand snap judgements (Lai et al., 2013).

The purpose of school disciplinary policies is two-fold. First, to improve and maintain the integrity of the school's physical and instructional environment. Secondly, to shape student behaviors to facilitate positive interactions and reduce misbehavior (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010). Interventions for student behavior need to stress not only prevention but also skill development (Skiba et al., 2010). Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) is a proactive, positive approach aimed at consistently teaching, reinforcing, and applying consistent behavioral consequences, while monitoring the performance of expected behaviors and collecting data for the purpose of making school-wide data driven decisions (Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Vincent and Tobin (2011) found that schools that had the highest disciplinary reductions were those that also had the highest measures of PBIS implementation. They found the greatest behavior effects in the elementary schools were noted in the classroom.

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However, Vincent and Tobin (2011) found that African Americans were still excluded from the school at a disproportionate rate and for longer periods of time.

There is evidence that suggested that behavioral interventions, including social skills instruction can be effective in improving the school behaviors for African American students with disabilities (e.g., Lo and Cartledge, 2006; Lo, Loe, & Cartledge, 2002). Robinson-Ervin (2012) conducted a social skills intervention with African American middle school students with behavioral disorders. To make the instruction culturally relevant, the instructor personalized the intervention using situations, materials and practice exercises that reflected the students' experiences and backgrounds. The greatest returns occurred for the students with the highest level of participation. An important consideration of social skill instruction, which is an essential component to PBIS is that students often need to be taught the specific behavior desired in schools and other environments (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

Some school systems' (e.g., Syracuse, Denver and Cleveland) efforts to reduce discipline disparities incorporated Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs which are social-emotional oriented approaches to behavior as an intervention (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). There are five widely recognized social and emotional competencies of SEL set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL Guide, 2012) which include self-awareness, social-regulation, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. In the 2015 Handbook of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), psychologist Joseph Durlak of Loyola University Chicago and his colleagues present a conceptual SEL model of coordinated classroom, school, family, and community strategies that are supported through district, state, and federal policies (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). They opined that a positive school climate and fair and equitable discipline are integral to school-wide SEL.

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Gregory and Fergus (2017) argued that educators themselves need social and emotional competencies where teachers with high self-awareness understand how their own emotions and those of their students' affect one another. These SEL intervention applications have evidenced reduction in discipline disparities.

Targeted programs that use the Response to Intervention Model (RTI) and provide services to specific students, with the goal of preventing further behavior problems have shown promise. In an effort to reduce disproportionate special education identification, Harris-Murray, King & Rostenberg (2006) highlighted school teams need to consider the use of a response to intervention model when considering eligibility of a student for an emotional disability, much like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Improvement Act (IDEA) directs for consideration of eligibility for a specific learning disability. Using research-based instruction and behavior intervention practices of culturally responsive pedagogy holds promise in eliminating disproportionate representation of African Americans as emotionally disabled (Harris-Murray, King, & Rostenburg, 2006). A key to this approach is to tailor the intervention to the student and if the student does not respond, a more intensive intervention is tried (e.g. Harris-Murri, King & Rostenburg, 2006; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

Another targeted program and response to disproportionality, Restorative Justice (RJ), uses peaceful and nonpunitive approaches to address misbehavior and solve problems in school (Kline, 2016). Several studies with the focus of RJ described evidence of cultural change, self-awareness, development of conflict resolution skills, a focus on learning rather than behavior and improved positive relationships that influenced the reduction of incidents, discipline referrals, exclusionary practices, and the need for external supports (e.g., Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, et al., 2008). Building on a pilot program in Denver, the state of

Colorado expanded the use of RJ in programs throughout the state (Restorative Justice Colorado, 2015).

In summary, many programs and approaches have been attempted to address disproportionality in an effort to reduce it and implement alternatives. Often these programs are combined with one another to address disproportionality including: Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), social skills training for students, Response to Intervention (RTI) for behavior, and Restorative Justice (RJ) which includes restorative practices.

Policy Impact

Policy development and revisions have either helped or hindered efforts to eliminate disproportionality in discipline and special education identification. Beginning at the federal level, in 2004, Congress included a mandate, within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that any district with a significantly disproportionate number of ethnic/racial students identified as having a disability or disproportionately disciplined must spend at least 15 percent of the federal dollars they receive for special education on intervention services in the early grades for students with and without disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires states to determine whether their districts are disproportionately enrolling minorities in special education, placing them in restrictive settings, or harshly disciplining them (IDEA, 2004).

State law and local regulation across the nation is initiated or revised in efforts to eliminate disproportionality. Steinberg and Lacoe (2017) share that as of May 2015, 22 states and the District of Columbia had revised their laws in order to require or encourage schools to:

limit their use of exclusionary practices; implement supportive (that is nonpunitive) discipline strategies that rely on behavioral interventions; and provide support services such as counseling, dropout prevention, and guidance services for at-risk students. As of the 2015-2016 school year, 23 of the 100 largest school districts nationwide had implemented policy reforms requiring nonpunitive discipline strategies and/or limits to the use of suspensions (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). The Education Commission of States (2018) outlined how many states considered suspension legislation in 2017. Based on a review of 2017 legislative activity concerning suspension and expulsion at least 18 states proposed legislation and six states enacted legislation directly related to suspension and expulsion (Education Commission of States, 2018).

Due to the focused attention on disparate discipline practices and subsequent special education identification beginning as early as preschool, many states have considered and implemented a ban on suspensions, including Maryland, Tennessee and Arkansas, who have enacted legislation where students in elementary school cannot be suspended away from school, except for short periods of time, due to egregious incidents that pose an imminent threat (Educational Commission of the States, 2018). An issue regarding the aforementioned legal mandates is they do not propose solutions or resources to fill the gap between not suspending these early learners and proposing replacement interventions to increase instructional access for these young students.

In summary, disproportionality in suspension and special education identification is a long-standing and persistent issue in public education. Although suspensions and expulsions of students has decreased, researchers still contend that suspensions are doled out in a biased way, because African American students and students with disabilities continue to receive a disproportionate share of them (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). The literature is replete in

demonstrating the relationship between race/ethnic status and suspension rates; yet the reasons for the disparities are less well understood (e.g., Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Bean, 2013; Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gregory, Lombardo & Turner, 2018; Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

The debate surrounding disproportionality in special education identification of students who are African American and in the category of emotional disability in particular, remains highly contentious. The researchers continue to wrestle with the process of making meaning of these observed patterns of representation and their related outcomes, as well as conceptualizing why it is happening and determining the resulting implications for policy and practice (Sullivan, 2017). The immense body of research confirms that students who are African American are being identified for special education as emotionally disabled at higher rates than their peers (e.g., Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017).

The research confidently outlines that African American students who demonstrate externalizing behaviors are suspended disproportionately for those behaviors (e.g., Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Bean, 2013; Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gregory, Lombardo & Turner, 2018; Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). These same students are readily referred to special education and in fact these rates of suspension consistently predict rates of special education identification (e.g., Skiba et al. 2005). While disparities in school discipline by race and disability status have been well documented, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether or not these disparate practices involve racial bias and discrimination, although many studies have attempted to show a correlation between the two (e.g., Cameron, Payne, & Knobe, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gilliam,

Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016; Ginwright 2004; Lai, Hoffman, & Nosek, 2013; Lee, Lindquist, & Payne, 2018).

The impact of policy development has begun to change the way school systems view and implement discipline and special education identification. State law and local regulation across the nation have been initiated or revised in efforts to eliminate disproportionality with a specific focus on early elementary learners. The collection of the literature review supported the need to answer the impact of a locally developed suspension consideration process, to reduce disproportionality in suspension for Pre-K through grade 2 students with the goal of determining what influences school teams in their discipline decision-making, what are staff's perceptions of the process, how can it be improved and the ways in which implicit bias influences this discipline decision-making. Finally, it is important to study what impact does this process have on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students. The suspension consideration process was developed in response to a legal mandate to reduce suspensions in this age group, but this process in combination with other researched programs may best reduce disproportionality.

There are many programs and interventions that have been tried alone and together with the goal of reducing discipline disparities. These include Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), social skills training for students, Response to Intervention (RTI) for behavior, and Restorative Justice (RJ) which includes restorative practices. Many of these programs have been written into discipline policies with the intent of their implementation with fidelity reducing exclusionary practices and eliminating disproportionality.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A case study approach is a strong data collection method used to understand participants' emic, or insider, perspective (Hatch, 2002; Meriam, 2009). Qualitative research is richly descriptive and used effectively in educational research. Merriam states, "having an interest in knowing more about one's practice, and indeed in improving one's practice, lead to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design" (2016, p. 1).

This study employed a phenomenological perspective in a case study. Phenomenology was first conceptualized and theorized by Husserl (1931) as a way to understand the context of the 'lived experiences' of people (research participants) and the meaning of their experiences. However, many theorists have expanded on the theory to make it more aligned with current qualitative research methodology (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). The theory of phenomenology has enlisted many brilliant minds and theorists in the expansion of its application and viability to its day-to-day usability by researchers of different educational disciplines. Polkinghorne (1989), a phenomenologist, advised that phenomenological researchers should interview between 5 to 10 participants who have all experienced similar events (phenomenon). As such, the commonality of their experiences can be captured and interpreted. This qualitative case study from a phenomenological research perspective investigated why African American students are suspended away from school and identified into special education at disproportionate rates as compared to their non-African American peers, specifically at the early elementary grades.

To address the proposed research questions in this study, I investigated the impact of the locally developed suspension consideration process (See Appendix A), as well as the ways in which implicit bias influences decision-making in suspension and special education identification of early elementary students (Pre-K-grade 2); and how both the process and implicit bias in decision-making influence suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students through a case study. I included administrators and school psychologist from elementary schools implementing the suspension consideration process as participants in this study.

Maxwell (2013) says although "there is no cookbook for qualitative methods" and "there is no such thing as inadmissible evidence in trying to understand the issues or situations you are studying" (p. 97); "the relationship between the research questions and data collections methods and triangulation of different methods" (p.100) are key conceptual issues. Because of this, first, each participant partook in an individual semi-structured interview and next, the same participants partook in semi-structured focus groups. A semi-structured interview protocol was implemented for the individual interviews (See Appendix C). There was a semi-structured protocol of questions discussed during each focus group discourse (See Appendix B). I conducted a document analysis of the suspension consideration process (See Appendix I). The suspension consideration process team completed a document for each suspension consideration of a Pre-K-grade 2 student. These documents were analyzed to examine the suspension consideration process, the ways in which implicit bias influences decision-making, and the impact on disproportionality. Finally, field notes comprised another data source for this case study, which sought to inform the following central question and subsequent research questions:

Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?

1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?

2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?

3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American Students?

4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?

The case study research examined the perceptions of the school staff who participated in the suspension consideration process regarding, the process, what influences discipline decision-making, the ways in which implicit bias influences this decision-making, and ultimately how the implementation of the suspension consideration process impacts suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students. The outcomes unpacked why African American students were suspended away from school and identified into special education at disproportionate rates as compared to their non-African American peers, specifically at the early elementary grades.

Research Design

The study's purpose was not solely to derive information about the phenomenon of disproportionality but to use the information to help leaders change the education system and positively impact affected students. Attaining the various leaders and school psychologists who

participated on the suspension consideration process team to discern if suspensions are warranted for Pre-K through grade 2 students was crucial for providing information to help leaders refine processes, programs and procedures designed to address the needs of students with racially marginalized backgrounds (primarily African American students) and/or students with disabilities.

By conducting a qualitative case study from an emic perspective, I was able to gain firsthand knowledge about the staff who implemented policies and practices at the elementary schools that have a direct impact on decision-making for discipline and special education referrals. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus groups, field notes, and document analysis, I analyzed the data using phenomenological analysis that led to discovery of the challenges and perceptions relating to disciplinary disproportionality and special education identification disproportionality. I triangulated the codified data against information in the literature review. The semi-structured interviews and semi-structured focus groups discussions were carefully and systematically coded, and field notes and suspension consideration process document analysis were compared against the categorized themes.

Setting

The focus of the study was on the primary elementary grades; therefore, elementary schools in Big Valley were the specific sites for this study. The school system is comprised of approximately 42,000 students in sixty-nine schools. Thirty-eight of the schools are elementary schools and all of the 38 elementary schools implement the suspension consideration process. For the purpose of this study, only elementary administrators and school psychologists who participate in the suspension consideration process were included as participants in this study.

This study included participants from thirteen elementary schools for both the semi-structured interviews and semi-structured focus groups in Big Valley.

Big Valley's enrollment for 2019 school year was 42,789 students, an increase of 585 students over the year before. The racial/ethnic composition of the student body from school years 2017, 2018, and 2019 is outlined in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Big Valley Student Body Racial/Ethnic and Student Program Composition

Race/Ethnic Status and Student Program	Percent of Total Student Body		
	2017	2018	2019
White	61.8%	60.4%	58.9%
Hispanic/Latino	15.5%	16.5%	17.1%
Black/African American	11.9%	12.1%	12.5%
Asian	5.3%	5.4%	5.5%
2 or more races	4.9%	5.0%	5.5%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
Special Education Services	10.1%	10.3%	10.5%
English Learners	5.8%	6.4%	6.7%
Free or Reduced-Price Meal Services	26.6%	25.8%	25.5%

The percent of the student body remained consistent with only slight variance across race/ethnic status and student program for all three school years. Black/African American student body averaged at 12 percent of the student body. Special education student program remained constant at 10 percent.

Big Valley administrative and teaching staff participated in cultural proficiency training in school years 2017, 2018, and 2019. Cultural proficiency training in Big Valley is an initiative to promote student achievement and equity through culturally responsive classroom practices and resources that best meet the needs of a diverse student population. Cultural factors and equity discussed in training included but are not limited to ability, age, ethnicity, family structures, gender, gender expression, gender identity, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. The training includes honoring the differences among cultures, valuing diversity, interacting knowledgeably and respectfully between a variety of cultural groups and the recognition of any existing biases held by staff. The training descriptions are outlined below in Table 6 and 7.

Table 6

2017 Administrator Cultural Proficiency (CP) Professional Learning Session Descriptions

Title	Type and Description
Introduction to Three Year Cultural Proficiency Action Plan	- An introduction to the District Equity CP initiative, history of education inequity/equity in U.S. and school district, and sharing of action plan to address inequities.
Perception: Impact on Stereotypes and Bias	- Consider how perception, stereotypes, and bias influence our interactions with others. - Determine how the four diversity wheel dimensions have shaped our perception of self and others. - Define steps on the cultural proficiency continuum, critical attributes and examples.
Creating a School Environment of Learning	- Identify the connection between classroom culture and school culture. - Acknowledge the relationship between personal identity factors and leadership style. - Explain the Five Essential Elements of Cultural Competence in relation to school environment.
Addressing the Ripple Effect: A Post Election Discussion	- Confront and discuss the impact the recent election is having on our students and staff. - Discuss how to engage in difficult conversations with students and staff.
Labels	- Understand the impact of labels on students and staff. - Recognize unintentional labels we may place on students and staff. - Discuss ways to combat harmful labels.
A Sense of Belonging: Valuing Others and Self	- Discuss a sense of belonging by examining feedback. - Consider how we will use feedback from previous PL sessions to facilitate sessions with our teams. - Discuss how we will begin planning to facilitate sessions with our teams on the Cultural Proficiency initiative.
Cultural Proficiency: How Do I Respond?	- Effectively engage in political discussions. - Understand how to engage in "Skilled Discussion." - Collaborate with colleagues on effective responses to feedback.
Framing the Conversation	- Discuss the importance of skilled discussions in culturally diverse settings. - Practice communicating with a balance of advocacy and inquiry to evaluate the 2016-17 perceptual survey data. - Identify timely responses WE need to make to address identified areas as we strive to achieve our goals.
Putting the Pieces Together and Making Connections	- Prepare to share with others our Cultural Proficiency initiative. - Examine Cultural Proficiency and Framework for Teaching connections. - Reflect on our role in connecting the Cultural Proficiency initiative to all that we do as leaders.

Table 7

2018 Principal Cultural Proficiency (CP) Professional Learning Session Descriptions

Title	Description
Framework for Teaching and Cultural Proficiency: Knowledge Creation	- View information and discuss the October knowledge creation teams and partners for the Framework for Teaching and cultural proficiency focus. - Review how personal bias influences our observations and discussions. - Meet with knowledge creation partner to prepare and plan for visit.
Knowledge Creation Cohort	Session conducted in collaboration with lead administrator of district initiative on instructional practices and teacher evaluation system. Purpose of session was to introduce principals to structure for year of meeting with small groups of colleagues to learn best practices for mentoring teachers.
Seeing and Being Seen- Knowing Self and Those We Serve	- Reflect on and discuss the importance of our continued cultural proficiency journey. - Reflect on and discuss the ways work and school cultures can cause some to not bring their whole selves to the work and school setting. - Discuss the impact of perceived bias in the workplace.
Unconscious Bias	Session lead by district Chief of Staff addressing the influence unconscious bias has on hiring practices.
Framework for Teacher Evaluation and Cultural Proficiency	- Discuss best practices for engaging in conversations about teaching with teachers. - Address the complex nature of teaching and reflect important assumptions about teaching. - Consider teacher practices regarding student learning within the organizational context of schools.

Table 6 outlines the cultural proficiency (CP) training for the school system's central office administrative staff which included a framework of cultural proficiency, personal bias awareness, valuing differences, and building a school environment for learning; all implemented during school year 2017. Table 7 outlines the cultural proficiency (CP) training for the school system's school-based administrators in the same areas, but also included creating a school cohort for CP and delivering the CP training to school staff; all implemented during school year 2018. Table 8 below outlines the 2019 cultural proficiency (CP) training for the school system's school-based teaching staff in the same areas as the previous years, but also included professional learning in knowing your students, creating knowledge, and the cultural proficiency lens for teaching expectations as set forth in the teacher evaluation framework.

Table 8

2019 School–based Staff Cultural Proficiency (CP) Professional Learning Session Descriptions

Title	Description
Cultural Proficiency and Framework for Teaching: Knowing Who We Teach	- Identify how individual background and experiences impact how one gets to know their students. - Reflect on current practices about how you get to know your students. - Collaborate to modify those practices in order to create a more comprehensive picture of your students.
Knowing My Students, Knowing Myself: Biases and Stereotypes	- Consider and determine how perception, stereotypes, and bias influence our interactions with others. - Determine how perception, stereotypes, and bias influence our interactions with students. - Discuss and explain the meaning and causes of stereotypes and biases within ourselves and our students.
My Students + My Expectations = Engagement	- Identify the connection between classroom culture and student engagement. - Discuss the relationship between student engagement and classroom culture. - Gain ideas and strategies that tie together cultural proficiency and student engagement. - Share engagement strategies and discuss the connection to cultural proficiency.

Participants

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples that are selected purposefully. Purposeful sampling is a strategy where "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). Studying information-rich cases through purposeful sampling yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. Participants in this study were gathered by the purposeful sampling of the administrators and school psychologists at the elementary level who could provide commentary and observation on this research topic. These participants were purposefully selected because the focus of the study is students in the early elementary grades (Pre-K-grade 2), and these participants are members of the suspension consideration process team that determines if suspensions are warranted for students. These participants are most knowledgeable about the suspension consideration process because they implement it. Big Valley's diversity background of the administrators (including school psychologists) are listed in Table 9 below.

Table 9

Diversity of Big Valley's Administrative Staff

Ethnic Group	Number	%	Gender	Number	%
African American	23	9%	Male	84	31%
American Indian	1	0%	Female	186	69%
Asian	5	2%	Total	270	100%
Hispanic	5	2%			
White	236	87%			
Total	270	100%			

Note the demographic breakdown of the Big Valley administrators in Table 9 is representative of the demographic breakdown of the smaller subset of administrator participants in the study that included elementary administrators and school psychologists who participate in the suspension consideration process. There were 17 total participants in this study. The participant group for this study included both male (n=4) and female (n=13) participants. Participants in this study needed to be a part of the consideration for suspension for Pre-K to grade 2 process. Of the participants, there were principals (n=8), assistant principals (n=5), and school psychologists (n=4). Participants reported ethnicities were Caucasian (n=15) and African American (n=2). Participants in this study group included two staff who had been in the school system 0-5 years, seven with 11-15 years, three with 16-20 years, and five with 20 or more years. All 17 participants reported they had participated in cultural proficiency training, specifically they had participated in the cultural proficiency training outlined in Table 7 and Table 8 in 2018 and 2019. Participant Demographics is an appendix to reference for specific participant detail (See Appendix F).

Participants for this study were chosen based upon their role in the suspension consideration process team and their potential to add to the understanding of the school system procedures related to suspension and special education identification of elementary students. The participants were invited through emails requesting their expertise to participate in a semi-structured interview and a semi-structured focus group. Participants completed a survey to indicate their interest in participating in the study. All participants were informed of the confidentiality of their participation. Reassurance was provided from me regarding the confidentiality of the study. I stressed the importance of the participants' candid sharing to support the richness of the data collection for the research. The written informed consent

outlining this confidentiality was provided to the volunteers (See Appendix E). No voluntary

participants were excluded from the study as they all consented to be recorded. As employees of

Big Valley, their participation was confidential, but they shared personal views with professional

peers in the semi-structured focus groups. Compensation for participation included a gift card to

Starbucks for ten dollars.

Data Collection Methods

In this qualitative case study, I was the primary instrument for data collection and

analysis. It was critically important for me to remain consistent with my research design.

Additionally, being aware of my bias and triangulating the data through multiple methods, using

member checks, peer examination and participatory or collaborative modes of research was

critical in ensuring validity and reliability in the study (Merriam, 2001). At the onset of the

study, my researcher positionality was clearly outlined in Chapter 1 where my assumptions,

worldview and theoretical orientation related to the discipline and special education

identification disproportionality of African American students is clarified. The overall subjective

perceptions and biases of both the participants and me, as the research instrument, were taken

into consideration in the research frame. Because I was the primary research instrument, all

analyses of data collected were filtered through my worldview, values and perspective and it was

critically important for me to bracket my biases as I collected and analyzed the data.

Maxwell (2013) says this about qualitative method selection, "almost any general

question about the use of methods is it depends" (p. 87). The rationale for my research methods

depends on the issues I was studying and the specific context of my research, as well as on other

components of my design. The bottom line for any decision about methods is the actual results of

using these methods in each study. Anything a researcher sees or hears or that is otherwise communicated to them during the study is data in a qualitative study (Maxwell, 2013). The following methods described below were used to collect data, including semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus groups, field notes, and document analysis.

   interviews. Creswell (2007) asserts that while there are several kinds of data, all data falls into four basic categories, "observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials" (p. 129). Researchers may use many different techniques, but at the heart of qualitative research is the desire to expose the human part of a story through interview. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe including feelings, thoughts, intentions and behaviors that took place at a previous point in time (Patton, 2002).

   I conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the 17 participants. Each interview was semi-structured and included open-ended questions related to the research questions (See Appendix C). The interview allowed for additional probing questions as I deemed necessary. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

   Saturation in data collection frequently occurs between six and twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation also assumes that the sample is adequate for the purpose of the research (Rocco & Hatcher, 2011) therefore, the participants selected were administrators and school psychologists who implemented the suspension consideration process. Considering this premise of saturation, I analyzed the data as I collected it to determine themes as they arose. I interviewed until the point of saturation or when no new themes arose from the data. This became evident, in preliminary data analysis, at approximately the twelfth interview. The data I analyzed from the interviews informed the content, direction and substance of the subsequent

focus groups. Because I wanted to ensure that each participant that was interviewed also participated in a focus group, I continued to interview all 17 candidates.

I took notes during the interviews to ensure that all conversation and observation was captured. Additionally, I took field notes immediately following the interviews. I focused on participants' attitudes and answers during the interviews and provided information that were not revealed through the audio recordings while taking the field notes. The things I noted that may not have been revealed through the audio recording included: tone of voice and facial expression, hesitation or passion in answers, reservation in sharing in detail, or a quote that resonated with me from the interview.

focus groups. "Broadly speaking, a focus group is defined as a small gathering of individuals who have a common interest or characteristic, assembled by a moderator, who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a particular issue" (Williams & Katz, 2011, p. 2). As Krueger and Casey (2000) note, the purpose of focus groups is to promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which people can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about a topic. Participants "influence and are influenced," while researchers play various roles, including that of moderator, listener, observer, and eventually inductive analyst (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Those researchers who wish to enrich the results from interview might gain a great deal of information from asking similar questions within a focus group setting. Additionally, focus groups can be of tremendous value if investigators are trying to generate new hypotheses, study the relevance of particular concepts, or understand new terminology from the perspective of various groups within a school community (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, and students) (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Semi-structured focus groups (See Appendix B) were purposefully selected as a data source because there is a team of staff who participate in the suspension consideration process when considering suspension for a Pre-K to grade 2 students. The focus groups provided the opportunity for discourse among the staff implementing the same suspension consideration process across thirteen elementary schools. The discourse allowed for a more robust data collection than the previously completed semi-structured interviews alone as the focus group participants were prompted to share additional information based upon what other members shared. Furthermore, the focus group discourse was informed from the preliminary analysis of the previously conducted interviews whereby I was able to facilitate the conversations around the themes that arose in the interviews. bThese themes for further clarification included the reasons for suspending students and moving to special education testing, as well as the ways that implicit bias plays a role in the discipline and special education identification decisions. Using focus groups as a data collection method allows rich discourse between participants that I did not get from the individual interviews alone.

Merriam (2001) shares "the uniqueness of a case study lies not so much in the methods employed (although these are important) as in the questions asked and their relationship to the end product" (p. 31). The questions selected for the protocol were related to and focused on the research questions, but open-ended to allow for comfortable, candid discourse. The preliminary analysis of the interview data informed the focus group facilitation. I conducted four, one-hour focus groups with the participants who were formerly interviewed. No interview participant declined the focus group, so the researcher did not need to purposefully select other elementary members of the suspension consideration process team. Each focus group consisted of three to five participants and at least one of which was a school psychologist. Each group of three to five

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participants participated in one focus group session. The focus groups were audio recorded and then the audio recordings were transcribed. There was a note taker during the focus groups to ensure that all conversation and observation was captured (See Appendix H Focus Group Note-taking). Additionally, I took field notes immediately following the four focus group meetings. I focused on participants' attitudes during the focus groups and provide information that were not revealed through the audio recordings while taking the field notes. While the experience was fresh in my mind, I noted those individuals who shared eagerly, those who hesitated to share or were quieter at one particular time during the focus group than another, if emotions were evident during the focus group in reaction to certain questions, and topics of conversations that resonated with me in relationship to the research questions, etc. The transcription of the focus group sessions was codified in order to determine themes in the outcomes.

field notes. Notes were taken during and after the interviews and the focus groups. The field notes focused on participant's attitudes during the interviews and focus groups and provided information that was not revealed through the audio recordings. The things I noted in my field notes that may not have been revealed through the audio recording included: tone of voice, hesitation or passion in answers, facial expressions, reservation in sharing in detail, or a quote that resonated with me from both the interviews and focus groups. Field notes are used in case studies as a "common component of a database" (e.g. Maxwell, 2016; Yin, 2014). These notes were organized for triangulation of trends and themes throughout the data analysis.

document analysis. Like other analytic methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (e.g. Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Mirriam, 1998; Ralph, Birks, & Chapman, 2014). Atkinson and Coffey (2016) refer to

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documents as 'social facts" which are produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways (p. 47). A combination of qualitative researchers' document analysis approaches was synthesized to complete my document analysis (e.g., Atkinson & Coffey, 2016; Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Denzin, 2017; Merriam, 1998; O'Leary, 2004; Ralph, Birks, & Chapman, 2014). Document analysis is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation--"the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (Denzin, 2017, p. 291). Documents are a ready-made data source.

The phenomenon studied here was disproportionality in suspension and special education identification of students who are African American. There was a document analysis of the suspension consideration process completed documents (See Appendix D). The suspension consideration process has a resulting document from each suspension consideration completed by the suspension consideration process team including an administrator and school psychologist. These documents list the different interventions attempted by the school team prior to suspension and outline the process of decision-making when a suspension is being considered for a student who is Pre-K to grade 2. The completed suspension consideration process documents were analyzed related to the research questions as a component of the case study. This allowed the suspension consideration process, the ways that implicit bias played a role in the decision-making and the impact on disproportionality to be further understood while the data was triangulated with multiple methods (semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus groups, document analysis, and field notes) related to the research questions to support the themed outcomes.

O'Leary (2004) refers to document analysis as writing evidence--through interviewing the document and content analysis. In school year 2019, completed suspension consideration process

documents for every suspension consideration from any elementary school in Big Valley was collected for analysis. Nineteen completed suspension consideration documents for fourteen students (grades K-2) from eight elementary schools were analyzed. The contents of the completed documents were organized into a spreadsheet. I sorted the data into common themes that emerged and codified it against the literature and the interview and focus group data. This suspension consideration process completed document data specifically included the date, student name, interventions attempted prior to suspension, as well as short answers narratives to questions on the document related to why suspension was considered and if the behavior was a serious and imminent threat to self or others (See Appendix D). Additionally, I cross-referenced Big Valley's student information system to include the student race and the specific reported behavior incident considered by the suspension consideration process team as this data was not included on the suspension consideration process documents. This comprehensive data from both the completed suspension consideration documents and the student information system in relation to the behavior incidents was coded and analyzed to surmise themes. In the first tier of coding, I looked for descriptors, then in the second tier of coding I looked for patterns, and in the last tier of coding, I compressed the patterns into themes based upon the themes' frequency and in relationship to my research questions.

Peer Examination, Consultation, and Piloting

Peer reviews of both the semi-structured interview protocol and the semi-structured focus group protocol were completed by doctoral candidate colleagues. Additionally, the interview and focus group protocol were reviewed by consultants who have experience with focus groups. I refined the questions and protocols by making the questions more open-ended for comfortable

conversation, deleting repetitions in questions, reordering the questions for better flow, and clarifying questions to ensure the interviewees understood what I was asking. The peer review and consultation were very helpful in tightening the protocols to get at the rich data I needed to for the purpose of the study.

I piloted the focus group protocol by conducting a pilot focus group with three school-based administrators and one school psychologist to practice: the questions on the protocol, facilitating the conversation within the allotted time, and refining the protocol to get at the necessary rich discourse about the research topic. The piloting was very fruitful, as it further refined the protocol, gave my note taker practice with the note-taking device, and gave me practice in facilitating the focus group in a timely manner.

Data Management and Protection

After the data was collected and stored, participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities, and the individual identities of participants were known only to me. A spreadsheet that matched the data to participants' identities was stored separately from the data on a USB drive. My field notes, the USB drive, transcriptions, and backup data were stored in a locked cabinet in my home. I alone had access to this data. To enable analysis, the data was stored on a password-protected laptop. The data will be stored until the study is published and then it will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Following the academic institution and Big Valley's Institutional Review Boards' approval of my proposal for this study, I arranged the semi-structured interviews and focus

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groups listed in the previous section. I also simultaneously reviewed the appropriate

consideration for suspension completed documents to identify themes and trends that were in the

completed documents in comparison to the information gleaned in the interviews and focus

groups. I will unpack how I analyzed the data, determined themes and triangulated it against the

other data collection methods later in this section.

By conducting both the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I provided a more

comprehensive understanding related to the phenomenon of disproportionality. A detailed

analysis--including narrative responses from participants--provided a bigger picture, as

quantitative data alone could not tell this story. As needed, I returned to the participants and the

documents to triangulate the data and ensure trustworthiness. I conducted periodic member

checks by phone or in person to clarify participants answers. For example, I reached out to a

school psychologist by phone who shared a particularly emotional student story to ask how that

student was doing now and clarify if the staff was considering special education referral.

To help ensure credibility and validity in the analysis, I was required to maintain a high

level of objectivity. This objectivity was of the utmost importance. Data collection and

simultaneous analysis took place over eight months, in the fall, winter, and early spring, from

September 2018 through to April 2019.

The case study focused on the phenomenon of disproportionality in suspension and

special education disproportionality and resulted in data that was analyzed, using focus group

and interview transcriptions, suspension consideration process documents, and field notes. The

table below shows the alignment between which research questions were answered by which

qualitative data collection method.

Table 10

Research Question and Data Collection Matrix

Research Question	Data Collection Instrument
Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?	
1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?	*Interview* Q4, Q5, Q5b, Q9, Q10, Q11
	Focus Group Q2
	Document Analysis
2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?	*Interview* Q6, Q6a, Q6b, Q6c, Q9, Q10, Q11
	Focus Group Q3
3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students?	*Interview* Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11
	Focus Group Q4, Q5
	Document Analysis
4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?	Disaggregated suspension data reports for school year 2017, 2018 and 2019

All coding for this study was done manually. Saldaña (2009) suggest that small–scale studies should be coded on hard–copied printouts first, stating, "there is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that give you more control over and ownership of the work" (p. 26). Manual coding was used to summarize and compare the data collected in relationship to the research questions in this qualitative study. The coding method used was charting with a first, second, and third tier of coding to surmise themes. Charting enabled the researcher to examine the data and construct patterns from the responses of the participants that were then used to develop themes in response to the research questions and

in relation to each data collection method. Each interview and focus group audio were listened to while each interview and focus group transcript were read.

Saldaña (2009) recommends descriptive coding as a first–tier coding method and pattern coding for second–tier coding. First, I charted the participant responses by individual protocol questions. Each chart had one interview or focus group protocol question and then all 17 participants' responses to the question per interview or combined response per focus group was listed (See Appendix G Charting Sample). During the three tiers of the coding process, the data was narrowed down from general descriptions, categorized into to specific patterns and then compressed into themes that developed. The charted, coded responses were compared to see patterns between participants' responses to different questions in both the interviews and focus groups as they related to the research questions (See Appendix J Third Tier Code Mapping: Semi-structured Interviews and Appendix K Third Tier Code Mapping: Semi-structured Focus Groups).

First, the transcriptions were read and listened to simultaneously and highlighted for patterns noted related to the protocol questions and the research questions. For example, interview question 4 was "*What behaviors do the students demonstrate that your team believes warrants suspension*?" In the first tier of coding, descriptive phrases were highlighted per response. A second reading was completed and patterns were noted in the participants answers including eloping, biting, kicking, pinching, attack on a student, attack on an adult, etc. In the third tier of coding, the aforementioned patterns were all compressed into the themes. In this example, the theme was physical aggression. A last review of the data was completed to ensure the themes were consistent. As the data analysis was an ongoing process, I continuously reflected

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on the data and wrote notes/memos about the outcomes. I referred to the memos to support my

data analysis and make meaning of the outcomes as the themes emerged.

A note taker was retained in the focus group process to be an objective observer noting

timeframes, resounding quotes, and participants reactions to questions to include body language

(nonverbal, quiet versus overly talkative, etc.) (See Appendix H Focus Group Note-Taking

Sheet). The themes from this comprehensive data set allowed for the researcher to explain what

is happening, and suggest why something is done a particular way through the words of the

participants.

Descriptive aggregated suspension and special education identification data for Pre-K-

grade 2 students for three consecutive school years (2017, 2018, and 2019) were compared to

determine the overall impact of the implementation of the process suspension consideration

process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American

students. The descriptive statistics were organized into a table indicating the total number of

suspensions for Pre-K through grade 2 students, the percent of students suspended who were

African American and non-African American, and those who were identified initially into

special education or students already identified with a disability, specifically with an emotional

disability from school years 2017, 2018, and 2019.

After analyzing the data, I examined the relationship between the data among the data

collection methods and the theoretical framework that served as this study's foundation: implicit

bias phenomenon. The data were analyzed both in relation to the theoretical framework and for

congruence with the current literature on discipline and special education disproportionality. As I

completed my third-tier of coding, I systematically aligned my findings to the literature in

Chapter 2 through the development of a matrix to discern if themes arose that were or were not readily reviewed in the literature of my study (See Appendix M).

Qualitative Validity

Merriam (2016) defined qualitative case study research as "the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive" (p. 39). Qualitative case study research is used to understand complex social phenomena and should have construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2014).

This study's validity was considered in its development. To determine validity, qualitative research uses five elements to determine rigor: truth, value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Krefting, 1991). The qualitative approach to research defines "truth value" as credibility rather than internal validity (as in quantitative research). Transferability is used in place of the external validity found in quantitative research, dependability in lieu of reliability, and confirmability rather than objectivity (Krefting, 1991). Qualitative research establishes trustworthiness through these strategies.

Credibility is determined by triangulation, interview technique, structural coherence and peer examination (Krefting, 1991). This study's credibility was confirmed by the triangulation of the different methods used (semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus groups field notes, and document analysis) as a check on one another, seeing if the methods with different strengths and boundaries all support a single conclusion. Dependability was determined by dense description of research methods, stepwise replication, triangulation, peer examination, and code-recode procedures (Krefting, 1991). Confirmability by triangulation and reflexivity was used to

enhance research quality by converging multiple perspectives from mutual confirmation of data, while minimizing distortion from a single data source or biased researcher (Creswell, 2017; Krefting, 1991). Dependability and confirmability in this study was confirmed by the rigorous data collection and simultaneous analysis by the instrument of research, me.

This data collection and simultaneous analysis was further enhanced by member checks and peer examination. Validating what the participants in the focus groups and interviews meant included that I systematically solicited feedback about my data and conclusions from the people I was studying. This usually happened face to face or by the phone when we were consulting for work or our paths crossed at a school system event. Additionally, I asked doctoral cohort peers and school system colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerged through peer examination while I maintained confidentiality of the study and its participants. Through the multiple methods employed in this case study (semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus groups, document analysis and field notes) and triangulation of the data collection and analyses, the study demonstrated reliability and internal validity through the repetition for the establishment of truth as the findings demonstrate replicated themes. This qualitative research aimed to use a case study approach to examine the empirical world from the studied people's perspective (Krefting, 1991; Merriam, 2016, Yin, 2014).

This study investigated why African American students are suspended away from school and identified into special education at disproportionate rates as compared to their non-African American peers, specifically at the early elementary grades. In order to understand this disproportionality, the suspension consideration process and the ways that implicit bias plays a role in decision-making of suspension and special education identification of early elementary

students (Pre-K-grade 2) was investigated through a case study using qualitative methods. The outcomes of these methods were manually categorized and sorted into themes. The data collection occurred simultaneously with data analysis until no new themes arose.

This study's purpose was not only to get information about the phenomenon of disproportionality but also to use the information to help leaders change the education system and positively impact affected students to eliminate disproportionality. Interviewing the various leaders and school psychologists who participate on the suspension consideration process team to discern if suspensions are warranted for Pre-K-grade 2 students was crucial for providing information to help leaders refine processes, programs and procedures designed to address the needs of students who are African American and who have disabilities. In education, it is critical to understand the institutional structures and how policy impacts local decision-making. More importantly when there is an understanding of why a phenomenon is happening through the lens of the people that live it daily, only then can educational frameworks be shifted and interventions can be recommended at an early stage to disrupt the cycle of disproportionality for African American students.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This qualitative case study from a phenomenological research perspective investigated why African American students are suspended away from school and identified into special education at disproportionate rates as compared to their non-African American peers, specifically at the early elementary grades. The purpose of this case study was to examine disproportionality in suspensions and special education identification within the primary elementary population and consider alternatives or interventions that can disrupt this disproportionality cycle that is pervasive across grade levels, as well as investigate the ways in which implicit bias impacts decision-making in these areas. The study investigated the effectiveness of the locally developed suspension consideration process. This study explored solutions to eliminate disproportionality in Big Valley, specifically at the early elementary grades (Pre-K-Grade 2). The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research questions based on the collected and analyzed data explored in this study.

Chapter 4 contains the findings of the study related to the research questions with evidence from the data collection method outcomes. The chapter is divided into ten sections: (1) statement of the problem, (2) purpose of the study, (3) participants, (4) data sources, (5) suspension consideration document analysis, (6) influences on school teams who decide to suspend, (7) perceptions of staff implementing the suspension consideration process, (8) implicit bias role in suspension and special education identification decision-making, (9) impact of the suspension consideration process, and (10) answering the central question.

Statement of the Problem

Disproportionality in suspension and special education identification has emerged for students as early as preschool through the primary grades (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014), yet there is limited research related to disproportionality in this age group. Rudd (2014) highlights a study that evidenced African American students as young as age five are routinely suspended and expelled from schools for minor infractions like talking back to teachers or writing on their desks. The American Civil Liberties Union (2019) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as "the policies and practices that push our nation's schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems." Even in preschools, disproportionate numbers of African American students receive out-of-school suspensions compared to their non-African American counterparts. It is commonly known that the treatment of children in early childhood has major implications for their development and trajectory into adolescent and even adulthood. The "preschool-to prison pipeline" paradigm for African American males has been conceptualized as a series of roadblocks and obstacles that hinder African American children from academic success but funnel them into the criminal justice system (Jones, S., 2017). While African Americans make up only about 15% of the general United States population, they are disproportionately locked up in jails and prisons across the country. A report by the U.S. Department of Education showed that 42% of African American preschoolers had been suspended at least once and 48% had been suspended on multiple occasions (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016).

The center of the conceptual framework of this study is a suspension consideration process or an act of compliance in reaction to the enacted legislation banning elementary suspension, but operating all the while in the background, largely outside of their awareness, are

the staff's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Their implicit bias in decision-making influences the process, an in-turn impacts suspension rates and special education identification rates. Research (e.g. Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017) identifies a connection between discipline and special education identification as emotionally disabled. Students who demonstrate a pattern of externalizing behaviors are more readily referred to special education (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al. 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013. Dr. Russell J. Skiba (2005), asserted the rates of suspension consistently predict rates of special education identification. This research study explored the center of the conceptual framework, from the people on the suspension consideration team and explored if the process implementation impacts suspension and special education identification rates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the impact of a locally developed consideration of suspension process for primary elementary students, grades Pre-K to second grade, on the disproportionate suspension and special education identification of African American students. This suspension consideration process was developed in Big Valley, a large mid-Atlantic school system, in response to a state Senate Bill mandate that required suspensions not be implemented for this age group unless it met specific, strict criteria. The suspension discipline decision is made by an administrator in consultation with a school-based mental health professional, usually a school psychologist in Big Valley. The student behavior must reach the threshold of a serious and imminent threat to others that cannot be reduced with the implementation of interventions. Additionally, the study investigated how implicit bias

influenced decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students.

Participants

There were 17 total participants in this study. The participant group for this study included both male (n=4) and female (n=13) participants. Participants in this study needed to be a part of the consideration for suspension for Pre-K to grade 2 process which included principals, assistant principals and school psychologists. Of the participants, there were principals (n=8), assistant principals (n=5), and school psychologists (n=4). Participants reported ethnicities were Caucasian (n=15) and African American (n=2). Participants in this study group included two staff who had been in the school system 0-5 years, seven with 11-15, three with 16-20 years, and four with 20 or more years. All 17 participants reported they had participated in cultural proficiency training, specifically they had participated in Big Valley's cultural proficiency training outlined in Table 8 2018 and Table 9 2019. Participant Demographics is an appendix to reference for specific participant detail (See Appendix F).

Data Sources

The overarching research question was: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?

The following sub-questions guided the research to achieve the purpose of the study:

1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?

2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?

3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students?

4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?

The findings of this study will first be shared in response to the research question topics, including a brief summary, and followed by their application to the purpose of this case study with a summary of the overall analysis. The table below shows the alignment between which research questions were answered by which qualitative data collection method and specific questions from those methods that were subsequently analyzed.

Table 10

Research Question and Data Collection Matrix

Research Question	Data Collection Instrument
Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?	
1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?	*Interview* Q4, Q5, Q5b, Q9, Q10, Q11
	Focus Group Q2
	Document Analysis
2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?	*Interview* Q6, Q6a, Q6b, Q6c, Q9, Q10, Q11
	Focus Group Q3
3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students?	*Interview* Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11
	Focus Group Q4, Q5
	Document Analysis
4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?	Disaggregated suspension data reports for school year 2017, 2018 and 2019

The findings will begin with the document analysis, followed by the research question topics in order by the supported interview and focus group questions, and document analysis where applicable, as well as a summary that follows each research question topic. This section will include quotes from the research method that support and extend the understanding of the findings in relation to the research questions including the overarching research question: what was the impact of the suspension consideration process?

Suspension Consideration Document Analysis

During the 2019 school year in Big Valley, suspension consideration teams including an administrator and a school based mental health professional, usually a school psychologist, completed a suspension consideration document to determine if a suspension was warranted for a Pre-K through second grade student. A document analysis was conducted to determine the significant themes of the decision-making process to suspend students in the early elementary grades. The completed documents were not included in the appendix to protect the identity of the school district and the students. To review the format of the suspension consideration document, see Appendix D Suspension Consideration Process.

Suspension consideration teams including an administrator and school-based mental health professional, usually a school psychologist, were trained to follow the standard operating procedures set forth in Appendix A Operating Procedures to Determine Suspension of Students Grades Pre-K–2 when completing a suspension consideration form to determine if suspension is warranted. The student must be displaying behavior that is an imminent threat of serious harm to be considered for suspension. The suspension consideration team must document interventions attempted to reduce or eliminate the imminent threat of serious harm. If at the time, there are not interventions or supports that can reduce or eliminate the imminent threat of serious harm to other students or staff then suspension is warranted. If not, then interventions should be listed and put in place to eliminate the threat of serious harm and suspension is not warranted.

Nineteen completed suspension consideration documents of fourteen students from eight schools were reviewed. I sorted the data from the complete suspension consideration into a chart by the gender, grade, race, reason for suspension and list of interventions attempted, if the student is identified into special education or referred to special education, the disabling

condition (if identified), the date the form was completed and the date of the incident for each

suspension consideration (See Appendix I Big Valley Suspension Consideration Document

Analysis). I took field notes during the document analysis to note any distinct outliers or

considerations to correlate with the themes noted in the overall document analysis.

vignette. I want to share a story of a child who was suspended through the lens of the

suspension consideration process from a description of the student's behavior through to the

suspension consideration team's reasoning for suspending. Sharing this student's story is a

sensitive topic because the story behind the completed suspension consideration process contains

details that are sensitive in nature and difficult to hear. Student F is a second grade, African

American male identified with an emotional disability. His behavior noted on the suspension

consideration form was an attack on a student. Student F's completed suspension document

listed intervention supports of consultation with the behavior specialist, with the school

psychologist, with the special education coordinator, intervention with the school resource

officer, and parent involvement, along with implementation of his individual education program

(IEP).

Rewind to last year, as a first grader, Student F had several incidents of an attack on a

student and subsequent suspensions. During his first-grade year, he targeted a female in the

classroom and had several physical attacks on this student as reported by a study participant who

was the school psychologist on the case. The school psychologist reported there was a Child

Protective Service (CPS) call made by the school because the student came into school from a

suspension with a bruised chest sharing that his female caregiver "beat the bad out of his heart."

The school team suspected this caregiver had mental health issues.

Prior to the 2019 school year suspension, the second-grade student was hospitalized for his behavior as a result of an emergency petition by the school resource officer and school staff because of a specific incident where he demonstrated aggressive, erratic behavior and elopement from the school. The suspension consideration completed document for the attack on a student, after return from hospitalization, indicated that the behavior was a serious or imminent threat which could not be reduced or eliminated through the implementation of interventions. The suspension consideration team emphasized the pattern of Student F's aggressive behavior toward others over the course of grade 1 and grade 2. Finally, they discussed the reason for the suspension was the need to have time to plan for both the safe return of the student and the safety of other students.

What was not shared in the suspension consideration documentation was the student's life story. Student F's mother died of a heroin overdose prior to him entering Pre-K. Student F lived with his biological father who was abusive to his live-in girlfriend. It was reported that Student F witnessed this abuse regularly. Additionally, the female caregiver, in the home allegedly abused Student F during his suspension. Student F had experienced a series of adverse childhood experiences or trauma during his early elementary school years that are impacting him as he progresses through his education.

The following patterns were defined, after the second-tier chart coding of the 19 completed suspension documents, which included the aforementioned suspension of Student F, through document analysis, based on the content of the documents and their comparison to one another to include:

- Discipline decisions were made within the same day, or the next day after the discipline incident.

- Eight-nine percent of suspensions were documented as incidences of imminent threat of serious harm including attacks on students and adults. Eleven percent were not.

- All completed documents resulted in out of school suspensions.

- The 2019 completed forms were for students in the first and second grade, with one outlier from kindergarten.

- Twelve students were male. Two students were females.

- Fifty percent of the students suspended had a disabling condition, either an emotional disability or autism.

- One student was in the midst of a special education referral at the incidence of the suspension. This student had a pattern of behavioral incidences of physical aggression in school year 2019.

- Twenty-nine percent of the suspended students were African American, 71% were non-African American.

- Ninety-five percent of all suspension consideration forms documented an extensive list of response interventions attempted to reduce or eliminate the imminent threat of harm. Five percent did not.

- Suspension consideration documents that resulted in suspension of primary elementary students came from eight elementary schools. Big Valley has a total of thirty-eight elementary schools. Seven of the student suspensions were from three of the study participants' schools.

- Four of the fourteen students were suspended twice each during the school year.

- Two of the eight elementary schools had more than one student suspended.

document analysis summary. Three significant themes emerged from a review of the completed suspension consideration documents from school year 2019 including: (1) Suspensions decisions were made quickly, in close proximity to the crisis situation; (2) Suspensions were predominantly documented as serious imminent threat to students or staff; (3) Although implicit bias could not be seen explicitly by review of the completed documents, it is interesting that one African American male student had only a parent contact as a listed intervention for a physical aggression and was suspended; other than this example there was no notable difference between the student, intervention, and behavior descriptions between students who were African American and students who were non-African American. These themes informed my analysis of the data from both the interviews and focus groups by comparing the themes and noting the robustness of the findings as they were common across data collection methods. These document analysis themes informed findings for research questions: 1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2? 3. How do suspension consideration team staff identify the role implicit bias plays in the suspension and special education identification decision-making of African American students? The document analysis findings will be discussed later in the chapter as it relates to the aforementioned research questions.

Influences on School Teams who Decide to Suspend

The first research question explored was, what influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2? To help answer this question specific interview questions, focus group questions, and document analysis were charted, coded for descriptors, patterns, and analyzed to surmise themes.

Interview question 4 asked, what behaviors do the students demonstrate that your team

believes warrants suspension? Interview respondents (principals, assistant principals, and school

psychologists) outlined behaviors that warrant suspension. In one hundred percent of the answers

repetitive physical aggression was a behavior outlined that warranted suspension. Regarding the

significance of the physical aggression a principal highlighted,

> [Principal] *"I think it's tricky because you don't want to positively reinforce. For some kids that's what they want is to not be in school. For some of them if it's environmental, it's just gonna make the problem worse. But when we've suspended, a lot of times it's been because it's not safe for that student or the other students, we need time to get together to plan, to make sure that the student can safely transition back into the building. But it is a fine balance. We had a student that punched staff, kicked them, destroyed a room. We were in the health room and he took the big scale, took it and threw it. The [Student Resource Officer] SRO happened to be in the building, he tried to grab the SRO's gun. There was just no way we could keep that student safely. That student had been with two adults and he was actually accessing education through Google Hangout in a room where there were not with other students because he had been so violent with the other kids, threw desks at them, really extreme behaviors."*- Christine

In 31% of the interview responses, respondents included bringing a weapon to school was a

behavior that warranted suspension. Thirteen percent of the respondents indicated sexual

behaviors, verbal threat that warrants a threat assessment, explicit language, and repetitive

disrespect as behaviors that warrant suspension. Regarding disrespectful behaviors that warrant

suspension a principal said,

> [Principal] *"And both children this year that I've suspended off the bus, African American identified emotionally disabled. And it's just, it's being physical with other kids on the bus and then total disrespect of the bus driver. He says sit, they stand. He says, "Close the window," they open the window. Yesterday, the child got up, the bus driver said, "Do not open the window." He opened it anyway. The bus driver said, "I told you. Please, do not open the window. I have certain windows open for a reason." The child got up in the bus driver's face and was screaming that he was not gonna tell him what to do. We had to take the kid off*

the bus. Yeah. So, that's continued. But this is the grandma that said he'll be okay by middle school. Like, okay."-Jane

additional considerations in determining suspensions. Forty-four percent of the respondents indicated the need to inconvenience a parent with suspension and have a break to plan for the student's safe return. Regarding inconveniencing the parent, a principal highlighted,

> [Principal] *"I suspend when I want to inconvenience the parents so that they become more involved and they're impacted by what's happening and then what can they do. I think it did send a big message to them because he didn't have any incidences for the year."*-Grace

Highlighting the need to for time to develop a plan another principal shared,

> [Principal] *"I do think when you need to have some times a time to develop a plan for the child to be safe, there have been situations where there was a huge incident that happened and I needed staff time to be able to develop a plan so that child could come back and be safe. I think that is the one time that I felt like I had to do a suspension because I couldn't have that child back in the building because there was extenuating circumstances with what they had done that I needed to get a plan together and make sure everybody was on the same place, that the teacher was ready for them, the child was ready to come back, the parent was all on the same place. We needed to have a meeting and gather my staff together to come up with a plan. That was a time that we had that."*-Sarah

steps taken by team members to respond to concerns. Interview question 5 asked, what steps do you or your school team take when a student is displaying externalizing behaviors that are impacting their access of instruction for students? Interview respondents (principals, assistant principals, and school psychologists) shared steps the school team take when a student is displaying externalizing behaviors that are impacting their access of instruction for students. Sixty-three percent indicated positive reinforcement including check-ins with the student, breaks, and the use of a reward system. Citing positive reinforcement options used in response to the externalizing behaviors demonstrated, one principal shared,

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[Principal] *"Positive reinforcement, we would do interest inventories to see what might motivate the students, and then take their schedule and break it down. Several other kids would have a mid-day reinforcement. Some kids could just be at the end of the day, it just depended. And then we would slowly increase the interval that they were reinforced."*-Christine

Functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans were intervention steps for student behavior in 56% of the respondents. Discussing use of functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans as intervention step, a principal shared,

[Principal] *"So, suspension doesn't really solve the problem. Having the parent come in and sit with them doesn't really solve the problem. Having the parent come in and yell at them doesn't solve the problem. It's the Band-Aid to get to the next day when the behavior's gonna be repeated. You know. And then if it's a repeated behavior, we start the BIP process, find the function of the behavior, work the process, and then decide whether they're special ed or not special ed. We might try some informal behavior management first before we go to the BIP process, but typically that's where we're headed. And I would say most of these kids, even before we get to that emotional disability, they've been identified as ADHD or depression from like a pediatrician or a psychiatrist outside of the school. Or they may have been identified in our school building and we have coded them based on something, like the Connors that the psychiatrist did, but we're not ... or psychologist, and we haven't gone to an emotional disability-ED. We try to be cognizant of that, 'cause it's not ... parents don't like to hear that diagnosis that often, but definitely do a behavior intervention plan."*-Laila

Sixty-nine percent of the respondents relied on behavioral supports from outside the school (i.e. central office staff, therapists, etc.). Forty-four percent of the respondents indicating teaming with school staff and parents to problem solve regarding the student behavior. Emphasizing the importance of parent engagement and use of other resources and staff to meet the need of the learner, one principal stated,

[Principal] *"Oftentimes, we meet to develop a plan and try to adjust it several times. Parents, I completely agree, fully engage the families involved in it. Families come in for meetings, families are called, families are positively called as well, that we're in constant contact with the families and knowing what our thinking is, and that we're here to work together as a team for your child. That's huge that we're all working together. I will pull in resources. I've pulled in the behavioral support professionals, I've pulled in our school psychologist before. I've pulled in guidance counselor."*-Sarah

Of the respondents, 38% would explicitly teach social skills or use Zones of Regulation, a

concept to foster self-regulation and emotional control for students to monitor their behavior. A

school psychologist discussed the use of social skills training as an intervention response,

> [School Psychologist] *"Typically, we respond with social skills training ... I've ran a couple groups last year, including Zones of Regulation. Work with the school counselor in lunch bunch groups, so the school counselor would pull the student for individual social skills training. Also, identifying emotions. How emotions can translate into behaviors, and obviously, developmentally appropriate, go over that with the students to help them understand."*-Bob

Twenty-four percent of respondents discussed progressive discipline that included restorative

practices. An assistant principal shared about their restorative practices,

> [Assistant Principal] *"In place of suspension, if they do remove that child from the classroom the expectation is that those individuals are then working with said student to problem solve. They create a reflection log, talk about the antecedents that led up to the behavior. Often times it's a relationship, a poor relationship, or what a child perceives as a poor relationship with a teacher or we pull from some very low-income areas and sometimes students are coming into together and something that may have happened in the neighborhood comes into the building. Once that happens and we work through the process, the reflection process with them, we never ask a student to apologize. We want it to be meaningful should they land on it. We don't ask them to do that. If they decide that's what they want to do certainly we praise them for that but it doesn't end there. It doesn't just stop there. If a child goes back and they apologize then we always will go in ... Typically, an administrator will then go into the classroom, cover for the teacher, act in the role of the teacher, and we pull any of the individuals that were involved, teachers, students, whomever it is, and we literally sit down in a circle and talk about the problems, how we could have changed it, and come to an agreement right there at that time. Everyone goes back to class and we hope for a great day. Now if the behaviors are more physical in nature we will remove students from a classroom, hold them up in our office, and call their families of both parties involved and have both the families and the students sit down with the administration and go through the exact same restorative practice circle."*- Judy

Other responses, ranging from 6% to 19%, include consider a special education referral, a cool

down space or use of restraint, and including school counselors and school support as first

responders to deescalate the situation. Referencing special education referral as a step based upon the students experience with trauma which could mean an emotional disability, a school psychologist shared,

> [School Psychologist] *"Consider if we feel there's trauma experienced by the student, or there's an underlying emotional condition, we would then consider a screening meeting [special education referral]."*-Bob

In four separate focus groups with discussions in each of the focus groups, administrators and school psychologists, respondents discussed the following, I understand that these behaviors and responding to them may be playing out differently in your different schools. What steps do you take to respond to this concern? One hundred percent of the focus group respondents answered they followed the functional behavioral assessment process to find the function of the behavior and developed and implemented a behavior plan. A school psychologist shared the implementation of finding the function of the behavior and developing and implementing a behavior plan,

> [School Psychologist] *"A behavior plan, if necessary, or a tier one type of behavior plan or some type of structure to support the teaching and the adjusting of the behavior."*-Jeff

Fifty percent of focus group respondents discussed communicating early and often with parents and using tier 2 and 3 interventions such as check in person with student, taking breaks, changing the student's schedule, use of token board, visuals, and social stories.

A principal further highlighted how they determine which interventions they try and why,

> [Principal] *"Yeah, 'cause sometimes there's pieces that we aren't aware of and once we know those pieces then that gives us a better idea how to respond [to the student's behavior]. It may be that there was some type of system at another school or on a daycare setting that they used that was a visual that might help*

them support a child, especially those pre-K, kindergarten students who do not fit into the public-school system yet. Or sometimes it's parents trying to work through a medication piece and try to determine is that something they wanna do or is there therapy going on, or a traumatic event that we need to be aware of. So those are kind of the first steps we use to try to figure out what is the next course of action and how can we best support moving forward and then multiple strategies I'm sure all of us can kinda throw in that might help. Sometimes a token board that reinforces the behaviors we wanna see and then a reward that comes along with it."-Denise

Less common discussions included 25% discussing help from Central Office staff including behavioral specialists and school psychologists, as well as the use of restorative practices after the behaviors and implementing social emotional curriculums. One principal indicated the implementation of restoring relationships as an aspect of restorative practice attempted as an intervention to return the student to the learning environment,

> [Principal] *"In the moment I think it's, like she said, assessing the safety, assessing the situation. I'm seeing, trying to determine what's the best way to interact with the student. Determine the best method to use with them, is it pulling them out, pushing them in, do you pull them to the side, do you go to other students and then go to the child, so it's really assessing the best way to approach the child so that they're not escalating more when you're coming in to intervene with them. Then having conversations and deciding about the best way, this is something that we need to pull kids together and do a restorative conversation, as is something that we need to have pulled this child out and make a phone call to the family. What do we need to do, how can we restore the situation so that those children's relationships back in the classroom are good and with the teacher are good?"*-Sarah

interventions prior to suspension. Interviewee respondents answered the question, what types of interventions does your school team attempt prior to referring the student to special education? Of the interview respondents, 56% reach out to school-based and central office-based resources for support, such as behavioral specialists before considering a special education referral. Fifty-six percent attempt academic and behavioral interventions in order to attempt to see progress prior to considering special education. Fifty percent also attempt to try

everything to exhaust all resources before considering special education. Regarding attempting

to exhaust every option prior to referral a principal shared,

> [Principal] *"When we come to the special education table, we have tons of evidence that we have tried everything but the kitchen sink to say this child is not making progress. And so, we have to do something a little bit more. But that should be an exhaustive list of things that we do before we get there."*-Sarah

Engaging the parent in the process was discussed by 38% of respondents. A principal shared

about the need to engage the parent and determine what has been attempted for the student,

> [Principal] *"Because before we can look into a true special education disability, we need to ask ourselves, have we engaged the parent, what else have we done to try and regulate the environment and the student's behavior. Especially considering, again most of these students have some type of traumatic background, or adverse childhood experiences factors, or something that's causing the behavior. I am not so sure we should be rushing to consider a disability. It's amazing, so I think that's important to remember before you move through the special education process. Making sure is there anything else that we can do first. Because young kids their brain's still forming, many times they're trying to process through environments that they've come from, or have been a part of, or experiences. So, they go in and out of traumatic crisis flight responses, or survival responses. But it's amazing what consistency and support and things can do like therapy."*-Martha

Thirty-one percent of respondents discussed moving to the student services team to discuss the

student's progress or lack there-of and consider tiers of intervention and support. Ranging

between 19% and 25% of the respondents included consulting an outside therapist,

administering functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans with fidelity,

reviewing academic and behavioral data, and relationship building. Responses shared by 19%

of respondents is that the only way to get resources or supports for a student is to identify them

as a student with a disability and an individualized education program. Few participants shared

the idea of the only way to get supports for the students, yet it is critically important as it

relates to other data collected throughout the study regarding the connection between

suspensions and special education identification which is the conceptual framework of this

study. Highlighting the quick movement to special education referral to get supports the

student required, a principal said,

> [Principal] *"I would say, to be very candid, that's probably what accelerates moving forward quicker toward the special education process, knowing that you're not gonna get any extra support unless you identify the student as special education."* -Christine

Reiterating this message, another principal shared,

> [Principal] *"You reach out to the experts and what we've been told is, schedule 504 meetings, schedule the IEP screening. So, a lot of times when you reach out for support, that's what you're told, is to schedule a screening and move toward identifying the student for special education."*-Jane

Reiterating this message, an assistant principal shared,

> [Assistant Principal] *"I think because I've struggled with this with my student. He's not a special ed student. He's bright. We've tested him. The only thing he qualified for was speech, but the mindset is if we want to get him into a program, with supports our school cannot provide, he needs to be in special education. I think how that has happened because we have a lot of students who they're not impacted academically because they're smart, but struggle with behavior ... This student's still bright. He is by far not below grade level but the whole thinking was if he needs the counseling piece, we're thinking we got to go the special ed route in order to get that support."*-Elizabeth

document analysis outcomes related to influences on school teams. Two significant themes emerged from a review of the completed suspension consideration documents from school year 2019 related to the influences on school teams in discipline decisions including: (1) suspensions decisions were made quickly, in close proximity to the crisis situation; and (2) suspensions were predominantly documented as serious imminent threat to students or staff. The following patterns were defined, after the second-tier chart coding of document analysis, based on the content of the documents and their comparison to one another to include:

- Discipline decisions were made within the same day, or the next day after the discipline incident.

- Eight-nine percent of suspensions were documented as incidences of imminent threat of serious harm including attacks on students and adults. Eleven percent were not.

influences on school teams who decide to suspend summary. The first research question explored was, what influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2? The severity of the aggressive behavior, the need for time to develop a plan for the safe return of the student, and inconveniencing the parent so that they become more involved were prominent themes that influenced school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through grade 2. In response to the U.S. Department of Education (2016) issuance of federal legislation, many school systems have implemented programs and approaches to address disproportionality in an effort to reduce it and implement alternatives to suspension and this is true in Big Valley as well. McIntosh et al. (2018) highlight the components of effective intervention to prevent and reduce disproportionality, which includes implementing a behavior framework that is preventative, multi-tiered, and culturally responsive. There was congruence between this literature and school teams in this study who rely on using interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted. School teams discussed traumatic events experienced by students impact them in a way that manifests as behavior that may or may not have school teams consider a referral to special education.

Perceptions of Staff Implementing the Suspension Consideration Process

The second research question explored was, what are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved? To help answer this question specific interview questions and focus group questions were charted were charted, coded for descriptors, patterns, and analyzed to surmise themes. It is important to note that six of the students suspended as determined in the document analysis came from two of the study participants' schools. This is important as I unpack the perceptions of the staff implementing the suspension consideration process.

experiences with the suspension consideration process. Interview respondents answered the question, describe your experiences completing the steps of the suspension consideration process when you are considering suspending a student who is Pre-K through grade 2. A principal shared a personal experience using the suspension consideration process,

> [Principal] *"So, I had a student and he was super, super abusive to staff in my building. He was a second grader and day after day after day bit, spit on, kicked, hit, restraint after restraint after restraint. Just trying to get this child to be in school. We weren't even pushing the academics at this point, just be in school and don't hurt people. Stealing. Everyday stealing out of kids' backpacks, wandering the halls, lights on and off. He's the only second grader since that time that I've suspended and honest to goodness, I called my director and said, "I don't know what else to do and my staff is battered and bruised, and they're tired. We need to regroup, 'cause we are not doing what's right for this kid. This cannot be right." It led to suspension eventually. I worked with my school psychologist to do that, consider all the interventions we tried. We just went through and there was a series of questions that you have to answer to kind of reach the conclusion that a suspension would be appropriate."*-Laila

A school psychologist shared a personal experience using the suspension consideration process,

> [School Psychologist] *"There was a 1ˢᵗ grader, he was targeting another student in the class every single day. I think he had six to ten physical assaults on her in*

the first week. First grader, yes. Worked with school counselor. One day the student came in and was going through this, and said he had a bad heart, or his mom was saying he had a bad heart. The school counselor was just touching his heart, and like, "You have a good heart. We need to have some good behavior. We know there's good inside of you,"and stuff. The kid came back the next day with bruises on his chest. That was his guardian, we thought biological mom, but was not biological mom, hit his chest where his heart is and said, "That's the devil coming out of you." He came in with bruises on his chest. Again, the psychiatric conditions from the caregiver or guardian. We filled out the paperwork because he was not responding to these interventions and suspended him."-Bob

Another assistant principal shared a personal experience using the suspension consideration process,

[Assistant Principal] *"We used the process when a child punched another child. I recall the student might've punched another little girl in the nose, and I think it was a bullying situation. It was truly bullying. This child was picking on this child, and we had tried lots of things, but was not stopping. And so, that physical altercation made it so that we felt like we needed to suspend. If I remember correctly, that's what that situation was. My assistant principal and my school psychologist did that process, I didn't go through the process, he talked to me about the decision of suspension and if evidence was there, I felt like we did need that. We went through the whole process of filling in that paperwork and those type of things. I think it makes us think out of the box about what to do with our Pre-K through second grade students. Unfortunately, schools are seeing some of our highest referral rates are in kindergarten."*-Leslie

Fifty percent of the interview respondents had responded that they had experience with the process for considering suspension for Pre-K through grade 2 students and 50% had not because they had not considered suspending a student in Pre-K through grade 2 either because the behavior had not risen to the level of suspension consideration or the school team was trying to keep the student in school rather than suspend to reduce loss of instructional time.

Across four focus group discussions between administrators and school psychologists, respondents discussed, describe your experiences with the Consideration for Suspension of PreK-Grade 2 process when considering discipline for your students. What does it look like in your school? One hundred percent of the focus group respondents answered they used the

process, considered interventions tried, and needed to buy time in midst of crisis to develop a plan. Seventy-five percent of focus group respondents discussed student suspension patterns often resulted in a student identified with a disability going to a more restrictive setting such as a specialized program or nonpublic school. Less common discussions included 25% discussing using restorative practice after suspension, including disability awareness to reintroduce the student back to the classroom and that the behavior often is so serious that emergency petition to hospital was necessary.

A principal shared an example of a student who went through the process and ended up in a more restrictive instructional setting,

> [Principal] *"I did, we had one student last year who went to a special therapeutic program who, we ended up going to county on and he's now in a nonpublic placement but we did get to a point where we pulled that paper out and we had some really rough days and we worked through that paperwork and it was sitting on my desk, but we didn't use it. You get to a point where the child's not accessing their education, and you feel like you're not getting through to parents and this child, we had emergency petitioned (EP'd) him."*-Grace

One principal shared that the suspension consideration process encouraged teams to be more thoughtful in discipline decision-making processes,

> [Principal] *"Yeah, we have had a little bit of experience with that. I do feel like that this law has shined a different light on suspensions. When I speak to peers and other folks, I mean, people are thinking ... They're a little more thoughtful with what we do discipline wise. That's just my opinion when you're talking about our youngest students. I feel like people are a little more thoughtful with that. I think the law was a strong change for our state."*-Jane

A school psychologist shared their perspective regarding keeping students in school and implementing interventions,

> [School Psychologist] *"I feel that when we're in school and we have access to them, we can continue to try to teach them those behaviors through Behavior Intervention Programs or Behavior Intervention Plans, meeting with the*

guidance counselor, meeting with someone in the school. We have a more of a direct access to the change their behavior in a positive way."- Shawn

A principal shared her experience with the process with a significantly aggressive student,

[Principal] *"I had one before the actual process came to be, we knew it was coming, but this was a child we did suspend as a first grader, but the behaviors had started in pre-K and continued to the extent that we had already tested the student was already in special ed and had a body and had been in seclusion room many times just for the need to calm down. Physically aggressive with peers and adults and extremely strong. Being stabbed with pencils, adults being stabbed with pencils, punched in the face. The comments and behaviors related that were sexual in nature, like things this child should not know or be doing in front of other kids and kind of fixating on certain kids in the classroom that this child's behaviors were escalating to the point that they actually had to earn their way to go to class in the morning. They started in a space to work alone and get themselves together so they can go back, and often times didn't stay very long."*- Denise

An assistant principal shared the need for time to develop a plan for the student's safe return,

[Assistant Principal] *"And I also think, sometimes you need a breather, to get a plan in place. When all of your stakeholders are dealing with a child that's taking the majority of your resources, having that time, whether it's asking a parent to take a child home or even a suspension day. To be able to get a team together, get a school psychologist because I think in a perfect world, everybody would walk out of an office and go, hey, I'm here to help let's all sit at the table and come up with a plan. But realistically somebody is testing over here or somebody is doing something over there. You need time to put together something that's purposeful and meaningful and appropriate. You don't need all the time in the world but sometimes that one day can give you the time to sit down and figure out a next step instead of trying to throw jello at a wall and go maybe this will work and maybe this will work."*-Elizabeth

opinions about the process. The respondents interviewed were asked about how they felt about the process for considering suspension for Pre-K through grade 2, 69% were frustrated with the process and thought their hands were tied without resources to support keeping students in school as an alternative. They felt that the mandate was not backed with resources to support keeping students in school. They also felt as if they lost autonomy for discipline decision-making

when the mandate was implemented. One principal shared the administrators' feeling about the

suspension consideration process,

> [Principal] *"But I will say that I think there was frustration initially because it really falls to administrators ... When you look at like those of us who there's only one of us, and we have a student who comes in crisis, who's going to stay with that student? If we can't suspend him and they can't be in their class because they're aggressive towards their peers, who's going to stay with that student having the breakdown without the resources?"*-Grace

Thirty-one percent of the respondents understood why the decision to ban suspensions for Pre-K-

grade 2 students was made because they do not see suspension as a solution. Six percent of the

respondents indicated the suspension consideration process is one of compliance and paperwork.

Twelve percent of the respondents shared the suspension consideration process has

administrators lose leverage with parents because administrators cannot inconvenience parents

and get their attention through suspension of their child. Regarding the administrator losing

leverage by not being able to inconvenience a parent with a suspension a principal shared,

> [Principal] *"I don't think it was looked on upon favorably. And I think that most people I've heard from are people in small buildings that have very limited staff and resources. This would be speculation, but I think some people probably feel as if it gives them no leverage with a parent. Because some parents may not take the step to seek out a therapist or put supports into place on their end unless they're inconvenienced. I've heard that before, if we don't inconvenience the parents then they're not gonna take action by themselves."*-Christine

challenges of the process. The interview respondents answered the question, are there

challenges related to completing the suspension consideration process and what are they, the

respondents reported a range from no challenges with the process to the challenge of the form

being completed in the midst of crisis leading to rash decisions, the form being time consuming,

and each administrator views behavior from a subjective lens. Three participants indicated a

challenge to the process.

One principal shared how time consuming the suspension consideration process is,

> [Principal] *"So for me the hardest part was finding the resources I needed to do what I needed to do. And as a principal in a building, you have a million things and you really, it was a time-consuming process, but I didn't think it was outrageous. And I think, honestly, I think it's important because I think it helps me reflect."*-Laila

Another principal shared the compliance aspect of completing the form in the midst of a crisis,

> [Principal] *"When I said dot I's and cross T's, to me that was this is just the paperwork to back up everything else I have, not just I'm gonna fill out a form. To me, that was just this is the process part of what I've already done in the back work for. I guess if that back work has that background work is all been done leading up to a potential, if we're talking about a kid who over time might need a suspension, then I think that process works and it wouldn't be that hard in the moment to fill out. It's in the moment and the team is frustrated with the crisis that just happened."*-Denise

One school psychologist shared a challenge of the form related to implicit bias and subjective nature of discipline decision-making by different suspension consideration teams,

> [School Psychologist] *"So each administrator at each of those schools may have a different lens by which they judge ...I can perceive that as a challenge."*-Jeff

improving the suspension consideration process. Interview respondents answered the question, what recommendations do you have to improve the suspension consideration program?

A principal shared a recommendation of using this process proactively, prior to the crisis,

> [Principal] *"But you're in the midst of the crisis. Yeah, yeah, right. Then I think they're going to have to regroup and [determine] the resources and time to really get everything in place that they need to have. Right. Ideally, administrators should probably ... When you have students at risk, probably start to look at that form way ahead of ... and maybe having the time to really look at it to see, "Okay. If we have to go down this route, what should we be doing prior? It's really being more proactive in what have you tried and not waiting until that huge crisis. Almost like a Student Services Team for behavior."*-Grace

The proactive shift of the process was reiterated by a school psychologist who shared,

[School Psychologist] *"So I almost feel like, if that was pre-intervention to have that [the interventions] all in place before we have these issues instead of reacting to some of these issues."*-Donna

changing perspectives about discipline. Of interview respondents asked to discuss, describe how your participation in the suspension consideration process has changed your initial approaches to students who demonstrated challenging behaviors, 38% indicated it did not change their initial approaches to students who demonstrated challenging behaviors. Twelve percent of the respondents said that it did change their initial approaches as it made them more cognizant of when behavior starts and what interventions are tried, etc. One principal shared how the suspension consideration process opened their eyes to be more thoughtful in considering interventions,

> [Principal] *"I think that now looking at this process and looking at the specific questions going through, that those would be the questions I would be asking when behaviors start, where they start, so what interventions and supports have we attempted, which is kind of what we had been doing but this is more formal, so that way we can actually start a timeline like we've done this for how long, as opposed to just filling it out in the moment in the crisis."*-Denise

perceptions of the suspension consideration process summary. The second research question explored was, what are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved? School teams shared examples of experiences with the Pre-K through grade 2 suspension consideration process where students were demonstrating significantly unsafe behaviors and the school team needed time to plan for the student's safe return. School teams indicated frustration with the suspension consideration process as they felt it tied their hands without providing resources to support keeping students in school as an alternative. There is not staff or resources to support the

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students and the responsibility to deescalate the student and keep them safe was falling to the administration of the school. School teams highlighted the challenges to the suspension consideration process which included: different suspension consideration teams in different schools have a different lens by which they judge student behaviors and the suspensions consideration process is made in the midst of the crisis where clearer heads may not prevail. Implicit bias refers to bias in judgment and behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). Further research on implicit bias has identified several conditions in which individuals rely on their unconscious associations in situations that involve ambiguous or incomplete information; the presence of time constraints; and circumstances in which our cognitive control may be compromised. Staats (2016) states that school staff are faced with many, if not all, of the aforementioned conditions through the course of a school day and it is understandable that implicit biases may be contributing to school staff decisions. There is congruence between the participants' answers and literature regarding implicit bias in this question.

The participants answered they used process, considered interventions tried, and needed to buy time in midst of crisis to develop a plan. Cartledge and Dukes (2009) note "not only are African American students overrepresented in special education programs, they also tend to receive the most restrictive educational placements" (p. 384). The literature is congruent with the respondents in Big Valley who discussed the students' suspension patterns had students end up in more restrictive placements, such as specialized programs in other schools or nonpublic institutions.

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Implicit Bias Role in Suspension and Special Education Identification

race-based discipline. The third research question explored was, in what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students? To help answer this question specific interview questions, focus group questions, and document analysis were charted, coded for descriptors, patterns, and analyzed to surmise themes.

The respondents reviewed two redacted, completed consideration for suspension documents from school year 2018 for two different students in Big Valley; one student, a White female and another student, an African American male. The respondents were asked to review the two cases, and share what their thinking was when they reviewed the two students' outcomes. Eighty-eight percent noted Student B, the African American student, process for suspension was much quicker.

A principal shared the frustration noted in Student B's form documentation,

> [Principal] *"Student B's form jumps into what the child did wrong, that they ... it was also mentioned that the child was being considered for instructional assistant support, extensive history of aggression. It just talks about ... it's just general here. I don't see a lot of the proactive things listed here. I'm not sure that they didn't happen, but you can sense a lot of frustration in the student B's write up. You can sense the administrator's frustration here. Student B-they arrived at the school ...in April, yeah. Yeah, within a month. I mean, that's quick to be suspending him."*-Sarah.

Fifty-six percent indicated the hostile description of student B's, the African American student, behavior. The frustration of the author of the consideration of suspension document was noted. Fifty-six percent of the respondents noted Student A, the Caucasian student, had more interventions listed than Student B, the African American student.

A principal noted the White student having supports whereas there seemed to be more things that could have been done to support the African American student,

> [Principal] *"Interestingly, that this child- Student A, the white child, referred to BHP for mental health counseling and the parent is seeking outside counseling, which I talked about earlier, how I felt like the white families are more apt to seek outside help and get that problem solved. Whereas in this, I see student services team, I see starting functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) and the behavior intervention plan (BIP) process. I feel like this went more quickly to involvement of the school psychologist and the beginnings of what could be moving toward a screening process in Student B, the African American student."*
> -Laila

Another principal shared the speed of the suspension process for Student B, the African-American student,

> [Principal] *"That's really quick timing for Student B, the African American student to come in April, have an instructional assistant assigned, and then working on this form. My questions would be how many schools has the child been at? Student B.-What type of schools were they in? What were the supports in place there? Changing schools frequently for kids is traumatic alone. So, I notice it seemed like attention seeking behaviors, so this is a child maybe who was seeking attention in the way he's learned how. And sometimes it's self-fulfilling prophecies for kids too. So, we have, it's not an African American student, but we have a new student to our school in second grade. And similar situation, came in new, very traumatic background, but has kind of disrupted the norm of everything, reminds me of Student B as described in this form. And what I talked to staff last week about being careful in making pre-judgements, and labeling the student. Because he will fall into the expectation trap that we set forth towards him, just like any student we pre-judge."*-Martha

Across four focus group discussions between administrators and school psychologists, respondents discussed the following, if the only difference in two student discipline cases is race-based, talk about that. How does that play out in your school? What do you see, hear and do with that information? One hundred percent of the focus group respondents answered that adverse childhood experiences, trauma, are an impacting factor, beyond race, that needs to be addressed.

A school psychologist shared their perspective on the connection between the student's trauma

and their behavior in school,

> [School psychologist] *"I think a lot of that has to do with environment as I shared in our first interview with being more the intercity schools looking at the trauma that some of these families have gone through, multiple houses, being homeless, not having food on the table. I think that they come to us with a lot of primary needs not being met whereas up here at this school, for example, predominantly middle upper-class Caucasians. For me the discrepancy is from here then go to an intercity school where probably 50% is African American. In those pockets, maybe half the African Americans are very affluent and have tremendous households. You always have those lower income transient families bounce around from section eight housing to section eight housing and school to school. There's just a lot of disruption in their typical development. They look to control their environment as a way to seek control of their life through power struggles, through doing what they want to do, the defiant behavior. Oppositional defiant disorder. I feel it's just a need for control or anxiety in someone with a lot of trauma in their past."*-Shawn

Fifty percent of focus group respondents discussed that poverty impact in inner-city schools in

Big Valley where suspension of students is prevalent because the students want control, like they

have at home and additionally, some authority figures in school (teachers, administrators) do not

look like the minority students and some of these staff members demonstrate implicit race bias in

decision-making, along with difficulty building relationships with students that do not look like

them.

A principal shared their perspective regarding implicit bias,

> [Principal] *"Most of the teachers in this county are white. Most of our students are not. I do think whether it's implicit or not that if I don't have experiences in interacting with a variety of people and a variety of families and a variety of cultures, I might be more prone to get upset with two kids who have the exact same behaviors, but one looks different from me. There is definitely a gap in teachers' abilities to build relationships with students with every student."*-Jane

Another principal shared their perspective regarding relationship building or the lack thereof

between teachers and students and the need for improved teacher preparation,

[Principal] *"I can almost predict sometimes, and I just think it goes back to, if they think, if we're talking about race, they've got to build the relationships and they have to meet the students where they are and I think what you've brought up is huge in that...and I came out of college probably the same way. Thinking my experience is the way the world works, and are colleges preparing these teacher candidates for what the classroom... and are they having enough time in their coursework talking about behavior management? They need to be talking about trauma too."* -Grace

An assistant principal shared her perspective on teacher-student relationships and understanding

the student's needs, particularly if the student has experienced trauma,

[Assistant Principal] *"It's also perception versus reality. Just this past week, a teacher called and said they had to have an administrator in the room. Administrator went up to the room and the administrator comes, "What's going on?" And the child said, "The teacher hates me." "Why do you say that?" They gave some reason, and so the administrator talked to the teacher afterwards and she said, "I like the child, what's wrong?" And the administrator said, "Kid doesn't think you like him." "Jesus, why would he have said that? I do this and I do that." "Have you gotten to know the child?" Reasons came out what the child said the teacher kinda stood back. And there is a racial difference between the teacher and the child. Understanding that child. And I think the other piece is we know children who have trauma, forming relationships is very difficult for them and they don't wanna get close. And so, do children who have experienced a traumatic experience just push away, push away, push away because they don't have a form of relationship or are scared to form a relationship, or anxious to form that relationship for fear of losing it if they do get close to someone."*- Lorraine

A school psychologist shared their perspective on implicit bias and adverse childhood

experiences (trauma),

[School Psychologist] *"I think training, providing more opportunities in being aware of our own implicit bias and talking about these adverse childhood experiences that affect all kids no matter their race, ethnicity, gender. I think those are really important to know because again they're going to be a large population of students that we have, and so our job is to make sure that we are addressing their needs and their environment, as well as the kids who come through less traumatic backgrounds, to fewer challenging backgrounds. I feel sometimes those kids are the hardest to reach in term of emotionally, and trying to develop relationships with them, but I think those are the kids that need it the most."*-Shawn

Less common discussions included 25% discussing that the idea of racial bias had not crossed their mind, that there is differential treatment of students based upon race, that staff have a bias they may not be aware of, and there is a trend of students of color being placed in a more restrictive setting. Regarding the role of implicit bias and its influence on students because of the color of their skin a principal shared,

> [Principal] *"I guess that question I have to that is, is there an automatic assumption that students, African American students, must have something else going on, versus a white student? There must be something else because ... I can only sit here and talk from my cultural perspective and the color of my skin, so I only know what I bring to the table and ... So, is there a more benefit of the doubt given to students who are white? Like oh, they didn't get enough sleep, or dad is on a trip. Versus, oh well, look where they live, or vary stereotypical statements I'm making here but does that happen?"* -Denise

Another principal shared her insight on implicit bias impact and what our next steps need to be,

> [Principal] *"But if we're going to hit it, we got to hit it head on with people that are well trained on how to get it out of people and for people to see what they have, and all of us have implicit bias. All of us have it, and so it's not okay. It's better that we at least admit that we have it and deal with it and make sure it doesn't get in the way when we're dealing with kids and adults. It's fortunately true. It's the way it is. So, let's just deal with it. Everybody has them, but how you get people who don't want to think that they have that to be okay with that is the battle, and it's holding us back from being able to do what we need to do with students. I think it's a very personal thing because everyone has a different journey. You pick up those biases from your experiences and from your life. So, I think finding a way to tap into everyone's personal journey and acknowledging those things."* -Sarah

Lastly, 25% of focus groups discussed that the disparities noted is not a race issue, but rather an issue of teachers' high academic and behavioral expectations of their students.

teacher discipline referral. Interviewee respondents described their thinking about each individual, different teacher's decision-making to refer each individual student, student A (White student) and student B (African American student). Sixty-three percent indicated frustration and

exhaustion with student B, the African American student, while anticipating behaviors and experiencing safety issues because of his demonstrated aggressive behaviors.

One principal shared the frustration they believed the teacher may have been feeling,

> [Principal] *"I mean they're probably frustrated. I think the teacher doesn't want to be bothered having to deal with that behavior in the classroom. Oh my gosh, yes. That makes the biggest difference because I will have students who struggle with one teacher, but then they with a teacher who loves them unconditionally and it's a whole different ballgame. I can almost predict what grade level they're going to struggle in because that teacher has less patience and so ... and indeed it's probably the pressure from the teachers like, show me you're supporting us when they refer the student."*-Grace

Another principal shared that they believe the teacher wanted Student B out of their building,

> [Principal] *"That they wanted this child out of the building-Student B. Well, just because this just seems to be very, very detailed. I'm not seeing anything positive in this. I don't get the sense that there was a positive feel to how this child was being, to all the things that were going on in support of this child. It was more like a compliance thing; did you check off this box? Yes. Here's what we did. Did you check off this box? Yes. Here's what we did. Is that what this form is for though? Just as a documentation or ..."*-Angela

Six percent indicated it is tough for teachers to deal with an aggressive student like student B who is new to the school, but 12 % noted teachers may have wanted to help student A and determine what more could be done to help her either because of her gender or race.

An assistant principal stated Student B's behavior impact on the teacher and the school,

> [Assistant principal] *"My gut tells me Student B came in and rocked this teacher's classroom and this teacher needs immediate help. Student A's ongoing issues were certainly seen and addressed in a more systematic approach, is maybe how I want to describe it. I would say the teacher may have a more negative feelings toward Student B. April of a school year, things are going well, here Student B comes, and things aren't good anymore. In fact, they're bad. My gut tells me Student B came in and rocked this teacher's classroom and this teacher needs immediate help."*-Michael

Another assistant principal stated the difference noted between Student A (White) and Student B (African American),

[Assistant principal] *"Also, he's portrayed ... Again, I'm guessing it's a male. He's portrayed as a very different student than Student A in the verbiage, in the report. Again, that might be specific to the person who's writing it. Maybe that's the feeling of justifying the suspension that you're putting in language that's strong to say -To justify aggressive, History of aggression. Extensive history of aggression. Also, if he's coming in he's got a special education file that would indicate that they didn't say but I'm saying it. If he did come in -Because it said he has an extensive history of aggression. If they're looking at documentation, do you see that child through that lens of, "I know your trouble. I know you've had difficulty." Their perspective, and also then that communicates to a child, "I'm scared of you," or, "I'm worried about you." or, "I feel like you are somebody who's going to come into my class and turn my class upside down." How does that impact the way I talk to you and treat you and deal with you in class? It's like with Student A, because she is a girl, or maybe white, that the school team wanted to help her more, give her more interventions...I don't know."*-Elizabeth*

document analysis outcomes related to role of implicit bias. In one of the 19 suspension considerations completed documents, it was noted that the student incident resulted in suspension, but the sole intervention noted was a parent contact, yet the completed suspension consideration document checked that there were not interventions that could be applied to eliminate or reduce the threat of serious harm. This student was an African American male. The incident was the only incident listed on the student's discipline report in the student information system. The incident occurred in October of the school year. The incident description was an attack on an adult. The behavioral incident was described on the document as,

> *"Student was threatening to fight a staff member. He punched that staff three times on the back of the leg and was trying to pull down the staff member to the ground."*

This completed document was different from the others, as the others documented multiple tiered levels of interventions and supports such as: student services team, contact with the school psychologist, contact with the special education instructional coordinator, talk with outside therapist or agencies working with the student, emergency petition for a medical evaluation, contact the school resource officer, and contact the school system behavioral support specialists,

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to name a few. This completed document had text descriptions left blank (e.g., behavior description, parent contact, etc.) while the other completed documents had extensive description in the text fields related to the interventions attempted. This suspension occurrence was not from an elementary school of a study participant.

> **special education referral.** Across four focus group discussions between administrators and school psychologists, respondents discussed the following: nationally, there is a pattern of student suspension leading to referral to special education. I am interested in the connection between discipline and special education identification of students. What are your thoughts about that process and the timeframe in which it happens? One hundred percent of the focus group respondents answered that school teams rush to test in order to get student to a more restrictive environment so can get therapeutic supports because there are not resources if the student is not special education. A principal shared their perspective on special education identification and what that means for getting supports to students in need,

> [Principal] *"The process to identifying special education opens a door to other school locations, other programs because there's nothing else to support school and unless the child does have an IEP, it seems we can't request adult support which might be needed for a period of time for students, unless they have a 504 or an IEP and it's not as typical for a student with a 504, we can't get therapeutic supports for the excessive behavior. There's just, schools don't have the resources or the help they need, we have a student right now, who is white, that is in 1st grade, just moved to our school and significant behaviors, very unsafe behaviors, and we have nothing to support us. Our behavior specialist has been out and observed and knows the child, he went to her school last year. We've met with the parent, we've met with the school resource officer today and the parent and the student, we've met with the child's bus driver, but we feel like the next step is a screening because there's nothing else to support."*-Laila

A principal highlighted the understanding of school teams that in order to get a student the help they need, we need to identify the student with special education, but indicates as well the need for programming supports similar for students in general education,

> [Principal] *"Historically for a student to get the services in a program they needed to be a special ed student and in the past, it used to be they had to be coded emotionally disabled (ED). Now that's not the case and they can have many educational coding, but I think that's the broad understanding. If we want to get the help the kid needs we've got to go through that special education process. We need a program where there's still gen ed but we have some proactive strategies and ways to support the students, short term."*-Grace

An assistant principal shared the reason that we rush to special education referral is the severity of the student's aggressive behavior and its impact on the school,

> [Assistant principal] *'Well think if you, when I think of it in terms of, let's think of a student who we suspect is LD, learning disabled. We're still gonna put that kid in reading intervention, if they need it, and we're going to be trying all these things and then maybe we test in second grade, but when you have a student who is physically aggressive, we tend to be like, oh my gosh we need to get this process rolling. So, I think it's... if we felt confident in our resources in our buildings if we had a behavioral support specialist maybe we wouldn't jump to starting that whole process and try some things on the school level like we do with a student who's struggling in reading or math."*-Judy

Another assistant principal shared the staff consider students who are physically aggressive as ones who need a different program outside of their school,

> [Assistant principal] *"People don't say, that kid's learning disabled so let's get him to a program for learning disabled students. You get a kid that's throwing desks and biting staff members and somebody's like you gotta get that kid to a different program, get out of their school. They're really the same thing, but the staff are not adept at working with that emotional piece that students bring."*-Elizabeth

Less common discussions included 25% discussing that the school teams are not rushing to assess a student for special education because we have more resources to respond to student behavior in the schools in the school system (e.g., staffing, etc.) while others discussed teacher pressure to test for a disability because they want the student out of their room, and others discussing the need to respond to the concern by adding culturally responsive strategies into the curriculum. An assistant principal shared the slowing down of referring to special education,

> [Assistant principal] *"I feel that over the last several years we've certainly slowed down the process. I feel like teams are more equipped to ask questions, to try more things, to come back and meet again to give it more time. Especially when you're talking about our younger kids. I will agree with something that you said, Chuck, that I feel like at times we do wait too long, and I feel like that's the direction we're going. Everybody's kind of on that page. We do try absolutely everything twice, and then eventually we will get to a point where a screening is necessary. I do feel like academic frustration does lead to behavior problems and the cycle just continues."*-Michael

A principal shared teacher perspective that pressure the special education referral process to be quicker,

> [Principal] *"Teachers will come and say, "Well, this child needs to be tested for special ed. Okay, tell me what you hope to get out of that process. Just you and me. You talk that through with me, and in some cases, they want the child removed from their classroom. I say, "Well, guess what? Special ed is not going to do that for you or the child." But the teacher needs the student out of their classroom, because they think that is the answer and they want the answer now."* -Judy

Another principal shared the need for culturally relevant strategies embedded into the curriculum,

> [Principal] *"We're not putting culturally relevant strategies in our curriculum. What's in the curriculum is what's in the teacher guide is what gets taught. Putting those things in there would be helpful so that teachers are using those strategies to do some of that, the making sure that that happens, so that then before they get to the table you make sure you're sure how that stuff is there."*-Sarah

And finally, 25% of respondents discussed providing interventions before considering special education referral such as finding the function of the behavior, behavior plan, work with the school counselor or school behavior specialist. They shared there are higher referrals in the schools where there are less resources (e.g., staffing, behavioral interventions, social emotional curriculum). A school psychologist shared an example of this in schools that are smaller and have less resources refer to special education more readily,

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[School psychologist] *"I definitely agree with that, because schools that I go to I see a difference in behavioral referrals based on level of support and resources that they have within that building. So that they have less staff to be able to adjust the students having an issue or if they don't have rooms or areas where they can take the kid to give them opportunity to go on down with adult support, and it's a lot more of a challenge."*-Shawn

implicit bias influence summary. The third research question explored was, in what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students? School teams who reviewed completed suspension consideration documents, one for an African American male and one for a Caucasian female, noted the following for the African American male: the team moved quickly to suspension, the vocabulary used to describe his behavior was very hostile, and the completed document left the readers thinking the school team was frustrated with the student's behaviors. Participants identified potential implicit bias in the completed suspension consideration process for the African American male. This is congruent with the literature where a study by Smolkowski, Gavin, McIntosh, Nese, and Horner (2016) investigated the vulnerable decision points that elicit implicit bias in teachers and administrators where there is increased racial and gender disproportionality for subjectively defined behaviors, in classrooms, and for incidents classified as more severe.

Also, school teams felt adverse childhood experiences, trauma, were an impacting factor, beyond race, that needs to be addressed for the early elementary learners. School teams highlighted that poverty impact in inner-city schools in Big Valley where suspension of students is prevalent because the students want control, like they have at home, and additionally authority figures in school (teachers, administrators) do not look like the minority students. Participants

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identified that often staff members have difficulty building relationships with students that do not look like them.

School staff said they could identify the differential treatment of students based upon race and that staff have a bias they may not be aware of. The staff also identified that there is a trend of students of color being placed in a more restrictive setting. This is congruent with the literature where in 2015, a study out of Stanford University shed further light on the dynamic of implicit bias by highlighting how racial disparities in discipline can occur even when African American students and White students behave similarly (Okonofua & Eberhardt).

In regards to special education identification, participants indicated school teams rush to test in order to get student to a more restrictive environment so can get therapeutic supports because there are not resources if the student is not special education. This is congruent with the literature where Bussing et al. (2010) indicated African American students who are identified into special education as emotionally disabled, that demonstrate externalizing behaviors, have the highest rates of removal to an alternative educational setting, such as more restrictive special education placements. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), African American students were 2.28 times more likely than school age peers in other racial/ethnic categories to be served in special education as emotionally disabled.

School teams in Big Valley also indicated the need to respond to the concern by adding culturally responsive strategies into the curriculum. Implicit bias with regard to students who are African American was noted in the participant responses based upon their perceptions of what is happening and their opinion about the completed suspension consideration forms for both Student A (Caucasian student) and Student B (African American student). Participants could

speak to identifying the implicit bias, in others, from their personal experiences and in review of the completed suspension consideration documents.

Impact of the Suspension Consideration Process

The fourth research question explored the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students. To determine the impact descriptive statistics of aggregated suspension and special education identification data for Pre-K-grade 2 students for three consecutive school years (2017, 2018, 2019) were compared to determine the overall impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students. The state Senate bill banning suspensions in Big Valley for Pre-K- grade 2 students was passed on July 1, 2017. The suspension consideration process was developed in the school system and initiated in October 2017. See Table 11 below that outlines the outcomes and comparison between the three school years.

Table 11

Pre-K – Grade 2 Suspension and Special Education Comparison

	School Year 2017	School Year 2018	School Year 2019
		(Suspension Ban Enacted July 1, 2017)	
		(Suspension Process Implemented October 1, 2017)	
SUSPENSIONS			
# Out-of-school suspensions Pre-K-2	98	11	19
RACE			
% PreK-2 Enrollment AA	12.6%	12.8%	12.7%
% AA suspended	34%	27%	29%
% Non-AA suspended	66%	73%	71%
SPECIAL EDUCATION			
% Initially Identified*	41%	36%	7%
% Special Education*	47%	82%	50%
Emotionally Disabled (ED) and AA	13%	27%	14%
% Non-Emotionally Disabled*	54%	32%	64%
(* *All races*)			

Key-AA African American
Key-AA & non-AA suspended and Special Education percentages are out of the # Out-of-school suspensions Pre-K-2 per school year

Suspensions of primary elementary students (Pre-K-grade 2) significantly declined after the state Senate Bill passed limiting suspensions for early elementary students except under specific criteria in July 2017 and the implementation of the suspension consideration process from 98 in school year 2017 to 11 and 19 in school year 2018 and 2019. The percentage of

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students with special education who were suspended is variable over the 3-year period at 47%, 82%, an 50% respectively. Although it appears that more non-African American students were suspended than African American students, and the percentages are consistent, keep in mind the disparity between the percent of student groups enrolled versus the percent suspended (e.g., 2019 African American enrollment of Pre-K-grade 2 students was 12.7% and African American students represented 29% of the Pre-K-grade 2 students suspended). This represents disproportionate suspension even with the decreased suspension rates after the introduction of policy restricting suspensions of early elementary students.

In school years 2017 and 2018 under half, 41% and 36% of the students suspended in Pre-K through grade 2 were initially identified into special education. The total numbers of students in special education who were suspended in each school year were 47%, 82%, and 50% respectively. This data is congruent with the literature which suggests both students with disabilities are suspended more readily than those that do not have a disability and that suspension rates consistently predict special education identification rates. There is a drop in the percentage of students identified as special education between 2018 and 2019. This could be accounted for by the reported different subjective responses to student behavior in different schools in Big Valley. The percentage of students who were African American suspended out-of-school in 2017, 2018, and 2019 and identified as emotionally disabled were 13%, 27%, and 14% of the total suspensions respectively. The variability this percentage is not significant due the much smaller sample size of suspensions in 2018 and 2019.

document analysis outcomes for the impact suspension consideration process. The following patterns were defined in the 2019 completed suspension document analysis, after the

second-tier chart coding, based on the content of the documents and their comparison to one another related to the impact of the suspension consideration process to include:

- All completed documents resulted in out of school suspensions.

- Fifty percent of the students suspended had a disabling condition, either an emotional disability or autism.

- Twenty-nine percent of the suspended students were African American, 71% were non-African American.

The document analysis yielded findings that complement the descriptive statistic outcomes. The impact of the state Senate bill mandates and the suspension consideration process was a decline in suspensions of Pre-K-grade 2 students. Although it appears that more non-African American students were suspended than African American students, and the percentages are consistent, keep in mind the disparity between the percent of student groups enrolled versus the percent suspended (e.g., 2019 African American enrollment of Pre-K-grade 2 students was 12.7% and African American students represented 29% of the Pre-K-grade 2 students suspended). This represents disproportionate suspension even with the decreased suspension rates due to the introduction of policy restricting suspensions of early elementary students. In the smaller subset of nineteen suspension consideration documents, the same was true.

impact of the suspension consideration process summary. The fourth research question explored was, what is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students? The passage if the state Senate bill and the subsequent implementation of the suspension consideration process had a significant impact on suspension rates. The suspension rates significantly declined once the state Senate Bill was enacted banning suspension between

2017 and 2018, but the rate of those suspended who were special education or identified into special education did not decline, except for the initial identification rates in 2019. This is congruent with the literature where data on the discipline of students with disabilities is not extensive, yet most studies find that students with disabilities typically represent between 11 percent and 14 percent of the total school, district, or state but represent between 20 percent and 24 percent of the suspended and expelled populations (e.g., Leone, et al., 2000; Bean 2013).

Most importantly, even with the significant decline in suspensions, it was evidenced that African American students are still being suspended disproportionately. In 2019, African American students represented in Big Valley are 12.7% of the total (Pre-K-2 grade) student enrollment, but 29% of the students suspended in the primary elementary grades. This result is congruent with the literature where suspension rates decline, but remain disproportionate; although the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights announced in 2016 that the number of suspensions and expulsions in the nation's public schools had dropped 20 percent between 2012 and 2014, researchers still contend that suspensions are doled out in a biased way, because African American students and students with disabilities continue to receive a disproportionate share of them (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

Dr. Russell J. Skiba (2005) asserted the rates of suspension consistently predict rates of special education identification. In the present study students who were being suspended were either already identified in special education or were initially identified into special education the same year as they were suspended. Ranging between 13% and 27% over the three years, African American students that were suspended were identified in special education as emotionally disabled. The percentage of students who were African American suspended out-of-school in school year 2017, 2018, and 2019 and identified as emotionally disabled were 13%, 27%, and

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14% of the total suspensions respectively. A body of research confirms that students who are African American are being identified for special education as emotionally disabled at higher rates than their peers (e.g., Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), African American students were 2.28 times more likely than school age peers in other racial/ethnic categories to be served in special education as emotionally disabled. African American students who demonstrate disruptive, externalizing behaviors are more likely to be referred to special education (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Although suspension rates declined significantly in Big Valley after the implementation of the state Senate bill banning suspensions except in the case of serious imminent threat to others, the school systems suspension comparison aggregated data tells the story of African American students with and without disabilities being disproportionately suspended and being identified into special education, some identified with an emotional disability, similar as to what is described in the literature. African Americans with and without disabilities are overrepresented in school disciplinary sanctions compared to their enrollment rates across the United States (Children's Defense Funds, 1975, Skiba et al., 2008). Rausch and Skiba (2006) found that students who are identified with an emotional disability (ED) are at a high risk to be referred to the office, suspended or expelled. Similarly, Wagner et al. (2005) conducted a nationally representative study on students with ED and found that 47 percent of elementary and middle school, and 72.9 percent of high school students with ED reported being suspended or expelled.

eliminating disproportionality. Interviewee respondents answered the question, if you had unlimited resources, what ideas do you propose to eliminate disproportionality? Fifty percent

recommended a behavioral support specialist, therapist, and/or school psychologist in every

school building. One assistant principal indicated the need to train staff in cultural proficiency,

> [Assistant Principal] *"We need to train our staff. We need to build some cultural proficiency specifically around the areas of behavioral self-regulation, mindfulness, and relationships. It has to be a cultural shift, which has to start with the mindset of our own staff. Both administration as well as teaching staff and instructional assistants. I'd have a mental health professional in every building. I'd have therapists in every building, not just those that have specialized programs. I'd have a school psychologist in every building. I'd have multiple guidance counselors, especially at the ... Well, at every level. I was going to say elementary but I think at every level."*-Judy

Of the respondents, 31% recommended mental health supports and parent training for students,

families and community in the school. Twenty-five percent recommended a system wide social

emotional learning curriculum. A principal shared the need for teaching a social emotional

curriculum in every building,

> [Principal] *"Could we be learning through play more? Could we be doing scenario-based learning? Could we be ... Instead of having reading and math be the focus of our curriculum, could it be social skills that are appropriate. We need to teach social emotional learning curriculum to our youngest learners who come to us without school readiness and with very little interaction with peers."*- Angela

Nineteen percent recommended an eleven-month teacher for every school for cultural

proficiency, cultural confidence, and training to work with difficult students.

Between 6% and 12% of the responses recommended short-term, a temporary program to teach

social emotional learning, in school discipline options, smaller class sizes, African American

advocacy group for students and families, and honest cultural conversations with students and

families. A school psychologist shared his insight on whether school staff in Big Valley really

have cultural confidence to have the conversations we need to have to make a difference and

bridge the gap of racial tension,

[School Psychologist] *"Do we feel comfortable having honest conversations with families? Do we create an environment where families feel comfortable having those honest conversations with us? But we are living in a culture right now where we've got the Black Lives Matter movement, and there are students that, and they're coming off of this, who feel as though, if I'm sitting here like you and I are, being white and blonde, that people treat us differently in the world than people treat people who are African American. When I have talked to friends and colleagues that I know and work with, that is their experience. When you come to school and you're already thinking that and feeling that, and teachers are feeling that and thinking that, I don't know how much that permeates what we're doing here at school. I think it has come to a head. I think, I mean without going too far into this, I think we're living in a very politically charged world now too. Again, those conversations at home, or things that you hear on TV or things that kids are coming to school with, we're facing a real drug issue in this county. That's impacting our kids. It's not, we're not sitting here looking at these issues saying, "Oh my gosh. If we just had more money," you know? I think a lot of it is teacher training. I think it's a shift in belief system."*-Jeff

final thoughts on disproportionality. Of the interview respondents asked, is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I have not asked with regard to the suspension consideration process, discipline or special education referral decision-making? One principal shared her perspective regarding her personal experience dealing with disproportionality and the internal conflict she experiences,

[Principal] *"I struggle with the disproportionality, I got into it a little bit earlier with the cultural proficiency work, I've really done a lot of self-reflecting. And I know that my life and my life experiences are much different than the student populations that I serve at times. And so, I've really spent a lot of time reconciling that, thinking about that. And my preconceived judgements, and supports that I've had in place in my life, and supports that aren't in place for students sometimes that I serve. So, I'm just putting this out there. So, it's hard for me sometimes when I truly feel like I'm trying not to be biased, put those things aside and really reflect on it. But when I'm leading teams, or when you come to the table in an IEP decision and you do have all this evidence there, so that's where I have internal conflict."*-Martha

Another principal shared the need to look closer at the emotional disability eligibility process and training to staff in more restrictive programs,

[Principal] *"I do think that we need a lot more strategies and understanding for students that are emotionally disabled, that are labeled that, what that looks like. I think even with our staff, that is identifying- our special education teachers, what does that look like and what are proactive things to put in place so that they aren't necessarily labeled that, and that we're making sure that it is truly emotionally disabled and not that we're not setting them off. I'm feeling like that is a huge piece. Then, our specialized program that is for students that are identified as that has to be different. We have to provide additional training. Those teachers should not go in and getting the same training as a general ed teacher. They should be trained ongoing, and have special training so that they're able to come in and be productive to get these kids back into the classroom that we're teaching kids the strategies they need to function in the general education classroom."*- Sarah

A school psychologist shared the differential treatment of students of color and the implicit nature of this treatment,

[School Psychologist] *"The reason why there was concern about this, because I felt like some of the same behaviors for a student of color would get treated differently than for a white student. I felt like there was more tendency to attribute behavior issues to mental health concerns for white students than to be like a conduct problem or something for a black student, or a Latino student. And especially when it was just being disrespectful or disrupting in class, that kind of thing. I did see it approached, not overtly, but implicitly differently."*-Jeff

An assistant principal stated the need for a strong tiered level of supports for behavior,

[Assistant Principal] *"We need to have scaffolded tiers of support, not just for the academic side, but for the behavioral side too. What if we determined disabilities based upon their response to tiered behavioral interventions, like we do for academics with a learning disability?"*-Michael

Another principal shared the need for supports for students who are in general education to avoid the need to identify a student as special education to get the resources needed,

[Principal] *"We need supports for the child that does not have an IEP or 504, so we don't feel like we have to identify a student with a disability in order to get supports for them to be successful."*-Christine

Another principal shared the need for training regarding trauma's impact on student behavior,

[Principal] *"I really think it's important for teachers to understand the magnitude of the behaviors and trauma that kids come to us with. It might be an optional session, or a module they can do on their flexible planning time that they get done, but I just think it's so important because if we can help kids when they're really, really young, maybe we can turn things around that they don't end up in middle and high school with behaviors that are bigger and then may warrant legal supports."*-Denise

School teams recommended the following to eliminate disproportionality: a behavior specialist, therapist, or school psychologist in every building, and a school-based staff dedicated to cultural proficiency training in each building. Suspension consideration teams recommend social emotional learning curriculum that explicitly teaches students social skills and self-regulation and using restorative practices or approaches to resolve conflict and prevent future harm to keep students in school. Most school teams did not change their initial approaches to students who demonstrated challenging behaviors because of the suspension consideration process. School teams highlighted that teachers need to understand the magnitude of the behaviors and trauma that kids come to school with and be tooled with training to deal with it. School teams described how they struggle with disproportionality and the decisions they make that influence this disproportionality. Individuals struggle with these decisions for all students, and particularly students of color, in that the decision could lend itself to the increase of disproportionality statistics. Individuals recognize their life experiences are vastly different from those they are disciplining or identifying for special education. Finally, school teams reported they are struggling with the lack of resources available for general education students, whereby school teams feel they have to identify students who are struggling behaviorally with a disability to get then the supports they need.

Answering the Central Question

This study answered the central question; what is the impact of the suspension consideration process? Students in pre-kindergarten through grade 2 are referred for behavioral incidents that are considered for suspension. The suspension consideration team, including an administrator and school psychologist implements the decision-making process to see if suspension is warranted. The center of the conceptual framework is a process or an act of compliance in reaction to the enacted legislation banning elementary suspension, but operating all the while in the background, largely outside of their awareness, are the staff's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Their implicit bias in decision-making influences the process, and in-turn impacts suspension rates and special education identification rates. See the Conceptual Framework below.
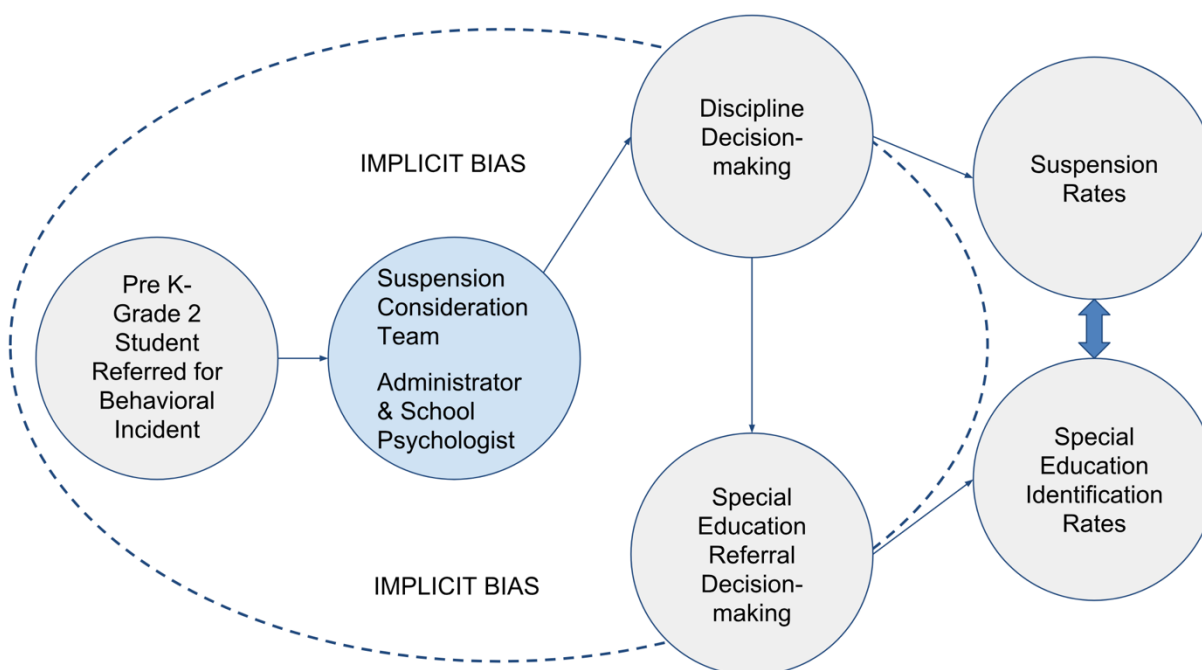
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research (e.g., Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017) identified a connection between discipline and special education identification as emotionally disabled. Students who demonstrate a pattern of externalizing behaviors are more readily referred to special education (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al. 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013. In this study the following overall findings emerged in relationship to these research questions.

1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?

2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?

3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students?

4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?

A matrix of the findings, data collection methods utilized in this study, and congruence with the literature to evidence the robustness of the findings through the triangulation of multiple data collection methods was compiled (See Appendix J).

Although the number of suspensions at the early elementary level decreased dramatically upon the state Senate bill implementation, in July 2017, banning suspensions at the early elementary level along with the implementation of the locally developed suspension consideration process, the following themes emerged that tell the story of the impact of the process including the ways implicit bias influences the decision-making processes.

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The suspensions were predominantly a result of documented aggressive student behavior where there was a need for time to develop a plan for the safe return of the student, as well as the need to inconvenience the parent so that they become more involved with the student in crisis. This was a robust finding as it was found in the interviews, further described in the focus groups and noted in the document analysis, with these findings noted across data collection instruments. School teams proactively implement interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted, as a last resort. Although these interventions were articulated, the consistency and fidelity of implementation is in question as indicated by participant responses and the document analysis. This was also a robust finding, as it was evident across data collection instruments including interviews, focus groups and document analysis, finding the theme across data collection methods.

School teams working to meet the need of a student demonstrating a pattern of behavior resulting in discipline suspension rush to test for special education to get student to a more restrictive environment. This process happens so the student can get therapeutic supports because that resource is not available if the student is not special education. This was a strong finding supported by the interview and further supported in the focus group question responses, across both data collection methods. The descriptive aggregated suspension data showed that in 2017 and 2018 school years, almost half of the students suspended in Pre-K through grade 2 were initially identified into special education in those school years indicating a quicker move toward special education identification. This school year the 8% of those suspended are initiated into special education. This shift may be due to more awareness about disproportionality. Although

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the low percentage should be considered with caution, as there were 19 total suspensions in 2019. This is important as the literature indicates that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires states to determine whether their districts are disproportionately enrolling minorities in special education, placing them in restrictive settings, or harshly disciplining them (IDEA, 2004). Big Valley is required to report the statistics to the state and federal government for accountability purposes. The literature is further congruent with my findings where Cartledge and Dukes (2009) note "not only are African American students overrepresented in special education programs, they also tend to receive the most restrictive educational placements" (p. 384). Likewise, Bussing et al. (2010) indicates African American students who are identified into special education as emotionally disabled, that demonstrate externalizing behaviors, have the highest rates of removal to an alternative educational setting, such as more restrictive special education placements. Research reported that this removal from mainstream education is associated with negative outcomes such as the stigma of being in special education and poor educational outcomes as a result of lowered expectations (Bussing et al., 2010). The literature is congruent with the findings and is discontenting as it indicates perpetuating a cycle of disproportionality of the preschool-to-the prison-pipeline in Big Valley.

Participants were able to identify implicit bias in the suspension consideration process as shared in their responses. This finding was robust in that it was evident in the interviews and focus groups, as well as in one example in the document analysis, with this finding across data collection methods. Some challenges to the suspension consideration process included: different suspension consideration teams in different schools have a different lens by which they judge student behaviors and the suspensions consideration process decision is made in the midst of the crisis where clearer heads may not prevail. School staff reported in their responses that they have

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witnessed racial bias in the differential treatment of students based upon race. Some of the participants could identify implicit bias of their staff. The participants reported that there is a trend of students of color being placed in a more restrictive setting.

School teams also indicated the need to respond to the concern by adding culturally responsive strategies into the curriculum. Another example of implicit bias impact included participants reporting in the interviews and focus groups that they have witnessed some authority figures in school (teachers, administrators) do not look like the minority students. The participants in the study also reported they have witnessed other staff members demonstrate implicit race bias in decision-making where they see some staff who demonstrate difficulty building relationships with students that do not look like them. Other participants reported that some teachers hold lower academic expectations for African American students who are considered as behavior problems. The literature is congruent with this finding in the participant responses, for example, Tenenbaum & Ruck (2007) completed a meta-analysis of research found statistically significant evidence that teachers hold lower expectations, either implicitly or explicitly, or both, for African American and Hispanic students compared to White students.

It was overwhelmingly shared throughout the study that adverse childhood experiences, including trauma, are an impacting factor, beyond race, that needs to be addressed for the early elementary learners. This theme was clearly evident in both the interviews and focus groups across multiple responses. The theme continued to arise while investigating the research questions. After review of the disaggregated data it was noted that the suspension consideration process significantly decreased suspension rates, but the rate of those suspended who were special education or identified into special education did not decline, except for the initial

identification rates in 2019. Although the suspension rates significantly declined, African American early elementary students are being suspended disproportionately. Disproportionality in suspension and special education identification is a long-standing and persistent issue in public education. Although suspensions and expulsions of students has decreased, researchers still contend that suspensions are doled out in a biased way, because African American students and students with disabilities continue to receive a disproportionate share of them (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Implicit attitudes toward specific racial groups can unconsciously affect disciplinary decisions. McIntosh et al. (2018) offer solutions when they suggest given the negative effects of exclusionary discipline on a range of student outcomes (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013), educators should address the issue by identifying rates of discipline disproportionality, taking steps to reduce it, and monitoring the effects of intervention on disproportionality. In this present study, Big Valley suspension consideration teams recognized the problem and worked within the parameters of resources available to solve the problem and ensure each and every student's access to learning in a safe environment.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter presents a summary of the analysis of the findings that were presented in Chapter 4 and my final thoughts on the study. Those analyses were discussed from data sources that included document analysis, semi-structured interviews and semi-structured focus groups, and descriptive aggregated suspension and special education identification rates, to answer the overarching research question, what is the impact of the suspension consideration process? This chapter is divided into seven sections: (1) restatement of the problem, (2) overview of the study, (3) discussion, (4) boundaries of the study, (5) implications for practice, (6) recommendations for future research, and (7) conclusion.

Restatement of the problem. Disproportionality in suspension and special education identification has emerged for students as early as preschool through the primary grades (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-2014), yet there is limited research related to disproportionality in this age group. Rudd (2014) highlights a study that evidenced African American students as young as age five are routinely suspended and expelled from schools for minor infractions like talking back to teachers or writing on their desks. Although these statistics for our earliest learners are most recently on the rise triggering states to consider bans on suspensions for these students, there are few studies of school discipline that have focused on the elementary level, and even fewer examined disproportionality across school levels (Rausch & Skiba, 2006).

The center of the conceptual framework of this study is a suspension consideration process or an act of compliance in reaction to the enacted legislation banning elementary suspension, but operating all the while in the background, largely outside of their awareness, are the staff's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Their implicit bias in decision-making influences the process, and in-turn impacts suspension rates and special education identification rates.

Research (e.g., Bean, 2013; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Sullivan, 2017) identified a connection between discipline and special education identification as emotionally disabled. Students who demonstrate a pattern of externalizing behaviors are more readily referred to special education (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al. 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013. Dr. Skiba (2005), asserted the rates of suspension consistently predict rates of special education identification. This research study explored the center of the conceptual framework, from the people on the suspension consideration team in Big Valley and explored if the process implementation impacts suspension and special education identification rates.

Overview of the Study. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the impact of a locally developed consideration of suspension process for primary elementary students, grades Pre-K to second grade, on the disproportionate suspension and special education identification of African American students. This suspension consideration process was developed in Big Valley, a large mid-Atlantic school system, in response to a state Senate Bill mandate that required suspensions not be implemented for this age group unless it met specific, strict criteria. The suspension discipline decision is made by an administrator in consultation with a school-based mental health professional, usually a school psychologist, in Big Valley. According to the process, the student behavior must reach the threshold of a serious and imminent threat to others that cannot be reduced with the implementation of interventions. Additionally, the study investigated the ways that implicit bias, the theoretical framework of this study, influenced decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students.

This phenomenological study was conducted in a large mid-Atlantic school system, Big Valley, using an analysis of completed suspension consideration documents, in conjunction with

analysis of responses from semi-structured interviews and semi-structured focus groups collected from administrators and school psychologists who participate in the suspension consideration process for elementary students in Pre-K through grade 2. Descriptive statistics of aggregated suspension and special education identification data for Pre-K-grade 2 students for three consecutive school years; 2017, 2018 and the 2019 were compared to determine the overall impact of the implementation of the suspension consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students.

Discussion

The Big Valley suspension consideration process was implemented after a state Senate Bill was passed banning early elementary student suspensions, except in certain circumstances. The suspension consideration process did impact suspension and special education identification rates evidencing a significant decrease in suspension rates. Disproportionality in suspension and special education identification rates was still noted for students who are African American as compared to their non-African American peers. The premise that was more telling were the perspectives of the study participants in relationship to the why the disproportionality is happening and what they were doing to navigate meeting the needs of their learners while keeping all students safe in their current circumstances. The conceptual framework of the study was congruent with the findings where the suspension consideration process, as an act of compliance in reaction to the enacted legislation banning elementary suspension, was implemented, but operating all the while in the background, largely outside of their awareness, are the staff's feelings, thoughts, and experiences, which represents the theoretical framework of the study. Participants were able to identify implicit bias in suspension and special education

identification decision-making. There were several finding in this study, but I want to highlight the most critical that cannot be ignored as they have implications for Big Valley and other national school systems that should be considered.

It was particularly surprising to note the discussions of the participants around the impact of student adverse childhood experiences or trauma on the student's in-school behavior, regardless of race. The participants described trauma that very young students experience as a precipitant to the serious behavior. In my literature review, I focused on discipline and special education identification disproportionality, where they intersect, as well as the ways that implicit bias influence decisions, programs that address disproportionality, and policy. Although I did not explore childhood trauma and its impact on public education in my literature review, this was a salient point shared by participants. Childhood trauma leaves its marks on the brain (Sandi, 2013) with unseen scars as evident in brain research. Addressing childhood trauma in today's classrooms is no small feat. According to the 2011—12 National Survey of Children's Health, nearly 35 million children in the United States are living with emotional and psychological trauma. The participants in this study discussed needing to train teachers and administrators in these adverse childhood experiences and how to deal with them in the classroom. This leads me to wonder if the school district is trying to treat something that they do not fully understand. And is the treatment currently used, suspension and subsequent special education identification, is a solution that makes sense for long-term elimination of disproportionality? Important training for educators is to recognize the indicators of trauma and mitigate the negative effects that result in student's school exclusion. Educators are responsible to ask what happened to the child, rather than asking what did the child do when the child demonstrates externalizing behaviors.

It is most critical to consider, based upon the outcomes of this study, looking into the idea brought forward by the suspension consideration teams that discussed inconveniencing the parent by suspending their child to get the parent's attention and thereby getting them involved. This is concerning to me that educators are so overwhelmed with the severe behaviors demonstrated by our earliest learners that they would consider having a student lose instructional time to get parental attention. This leads me to wonder what alternatives to suspension can be considered that do not end in the student losing instructional time? The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center (2016) reported rates of children in single-parent homes by race in the United States. In 2016, 66 percent of African American children lived in a single parent home. According to Kids Count, children growing up in single-parent families typically do not have the same economic or human resources available as those growing up in two-parent families. Compared with children in married-couple families, children raised in single-parent households are more likely to drop out of school, to have or cause a teen pregnancy and to experience a divorce in adulthood (retrieved from https://datacenter.kidscount.org). To that end, what can the school district do, other than suspending students, to support single-parent families to mitigate the effects of dropping out of school, etc. Also, how can Big Valley staff engage the parent(s) earlier, when the students are demonstrating engagement in learning, rather than waiting until a serious crisis time to inconvenience the parent when emotions are running high causing stress for everyone involved?

A point to ponder was the questions surrounding the ways in which implicit bias influences decision-making. Staff were able to identify a differential treatment of African American students in the responses from interviews and focus groups, but could not surmise or spoke very little about why this is happening. We cannot ignore the role implicit bias plays in

suspension rates or special education identification rates for students in the minority, yet it is difficult to put our finger on how to circumvent what lies just below the conscious of each individual decision-maker. The participants of the study could identify that it is happening, they could identify it after reviewing other staff's suspension consideration completed forms, and could even identify what it looks like in their own schools, yet they spoke very little about how to navigate around it to decrease the differential treatment of African American students particularly in suspension and special education identification. The question remains, how can the school district mitigate implicit bias in decision-making?

The passing of the state Senate Bill banning early elementary suspensions with the exception of serious imminent harm and the subsequent implementation of the locally developed suspension consideration process drastically reduced suspensions, but did not decrease the disproportionate suspension and special education identification of African American students. Participants shared the suspension consideration process is an "act of compliance." I am interested in how Big Valley will address the underlying implicit bias in decision-making if the suspension consideration process is seen as an act of compliance, with a check box form. The suspension consideration process alone is not the solution.

Probably most critical to consider is the theme that emerged where school teams identified students into special education after a pattern of behavior resulting in suspensions in order to get them to a more restrictive program setting outside of their home school. This is a pattern similar to the preschool-to-prison-pipeline, beginning with the stages of identifying young students with a disability and confining them to a more restrictive classroom setting that often includes restraint and seclusion as responses to behavior, which are responses to behavior

that are used also in the penal system. Big Valley sees this process described as getting the

students the resources they need and keeping their schools safe, but in reality, it is reminiscent of

continuing the cycle of disproportionality. How can Big Valley break that cycle?

Boundaries of the Study

A boundary of my study is the limited prior research in the disproportionality of students

in the early elementary grades. There is limited age specific literature to align with the findings

of the study. The purposive sampling of suspension consideration teams at the elementary

schools for this case study limited the generalizability of findings. Participants volunteered for

the study and represented a small sample of all suspension consideration teams in Big Valley. In

addition, the study was conducted in one state and school district and is not generalizable to all

elementary schools in all regions of the United States where suspensions are banned.

Because the suspension ban was passed in the state Senate in July of 2017 and the

suspension consideration process was in its first full year of implementation, the longitudinal

effects of the study was limited. The duration of my research was completed in a small

prescribed window in the first full school year of suspension consideration process

implementation which is a boundary to the study. In recognizing the significant drop in

suspensions, after the implementation of the suspension consideration process, the sample of

students who were suspended or identified into special education was very small which also

impacted the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, participants reported partaking in

cultural proficiency training. All of the participants of the study had participated in the school

district's cultural proficiency awareness professional learning in the year prior to the full school

year of suspension consideration process implementation and the small, prescribed window of

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research. The participation in this professional learning at the awareness level for cultural proficiency influenced the findings related to identifying potential implicit bias, as the participants are all trained at the level of bias awareness in the school district.

The selection of a qualitative case study was intentional to get to the human perspective regarding the reasons for disproportionality at the early elementary grades. My choice to self-report the data (collect, transcribe, and analyze the data manually) and not use an objective qualitative coding software is a boundary of the study. I was the instrument of research in the study; I bring my bias regardless of all of my attempts to mitigate and bracket such bias and thereby this is a boundary of the study.

Implications for Practice

The following implications for practice speak to the outcomes of the study and plan for how Big Valley and other school districts can continue to address and reduce the disproportionate suspension and special education identification of African American students. Implicit bias must be mitigated in discipline and special education decision-making. First, to circumvent implicit bias impact on suspension and special education identification, school districts should consider adjusting the suspension consideration process to a proactive consideration process when behaviors begin to manifest. If this occurs, the suspension decision is not an act of compliance during an emotionally charged and subjective decision-making process in the middle of a crisis situation. This would allow for school teams to monitor student's behavior progress or lack of progress on-going and provide interventions accordingly, rather than list the interventions attempted during the crisis circumstance in order to make a swift decision to buy time, allow for the safety of others, or to inconvenience the parent.

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Also, to mitigate the role implicit bias plays in decision-making, school districts should implement a form of objective scripting to walk administrative teams through discipline decision-making. The suspension decisions analyzed in this study were made close to the incident when the crisis occurred. Research on implicit bias has identified several conditions in which individuals rely on their unconscious associations in situations that involve ambiguous or incomplete information; the presence of time constraints; and circumstances in which our cognitive control may be compromised. School staff are faced with many, if not all, of the aforementioned conditions through the course of a school day and it is understandable that implicit biases may be contributing to school staff decisions. Supporting suspension consideration teams with a consistent, objective, scripted response to implement when faced with a suspension decision could mitigate the effects of implicit bias. School districts should consider training of administrators and school based mental health professionals in the objective scripting and protocols for discipline decision-making processes.

Because of the predominant opinion of suspension consideration teams that early elementary students lack school readiness as a reason for misbehavior resulting in suspension, school districts should consider the implementation of social emotional and social skills training system wide in the early elementary grades. School districts should partner with local preschools to prepare students for Pre-K with social emotional learning and social skills training prior to enrollment in the early elementary grades. Social emotional learning curriculum and social skills training that is culturally responsive explicitly teaches students social skills and self-regulation. It teaches students to take turns, play together, be kind and collaborative, self-recognize the intensity of their feelings, and initiate self-de-escalation strategies. It is commonly known that the treatment of children in early childhood has major implications for their development and

trajectory into adolescent and even adulthood. Partnering with local preschools to ensure social emotional learning curriculum and social skills training that is culturally responsive is available to preschoolers supports their school readiness and will disrupt the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

It should be a consideration of school districts to have a robust response to intervention for behavior similar to the academic response to intervention process for students. This intervention process should outline tiered intervention for behavior. Many districts have a strong academic tiered intervention response for reading and mathematics, but less strong in interventions for response to behavior. Each of these young children have their own complex story and their behavior manifests in ways that are vastly different than previously experienced by school staff. These conversations about our youngest learners and their behavior are now more common; therefore, school staff, including teachers, need a robust tiered model of behavior intervention tools to intervene and reinforce positive behaviors while maintaining student engagement in learning.

The special education eligibility process for identification of students as emotionally disabled is a subjective decision-making process. School districts should reconsider the emotional disability eligibility decision-making process to include the data related to the robust response to behavioral interventions as a component of the informed, objective decision-making identification process, rather than the current subjective emotional disability decision-making process. As well, school districts should consider a strong integrated system of emotional/behavioral resource supports, within the comprehensive schools, so teams do not feel they have to identify a student with a disability to get them the supports they need and place students in a more restrictive program setting. These supports could include staff, such as a school psychologist, therapist or licensed behavioral analyst. These supports could also include a

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sensory room with sensory de-escalation equipment, and social emotional curriculum resources in the comprehensive schools.

Lastly, school districts should consider staff training and implementation in restorative practices as an alternative to suspension system-wide. Restorative practices are practices in resolving conflict and preventing future harm, while allowing students to resolve disagreements and repair the harm done to others so that students remain engaged in learning. Restorative practices are an alternative to excluding students from school through suspension.

As a result of this study, school districts should write their state Senate staff and lobby to encourage their law-making board to amend policy on suspension bans to include alternatives to suspension, rather than mandating the suspension ban alone. The alternatives to suspensions require funding and I encourage state and local education entities consider funding the alternatives to suspension.

Recommendations for Research

After completing this research and analysis, the following are recommendations for future research. Participants in the study shared overwhelmingly that adverse childhood experiences, including the trauma experiences outlined in the case study vignette, was an impacting factor, beyond race, that needed to be addressed. I recommend future research on the impact of adverse childhood experiences or student trauma and its correlation with suspension and special education identification rates of minority students. Restorative practices are an alternative to suspension and with proper implementation are a programmatic approach to reduce disproportionality. Also, a robust tiered level of behavior interventions is an approach to reduce disproportionality. I am interested in the implementation of these two approaches on discipline

and special education identification. I recommend future research to assess the implementation of restorative practices in combination with a robust response to intervention process for behavioral needs and their impact on suspension and special education identification rates.

As discussed in the implications for practice, objective scripting and protocols in discipline decision-making could be a way to mitigate the role implicit bias plays in discipline decision-making. I recommend future research to assess the impact of the implementation of objective scripting and protocols in discipline decision-making and its ability to counteract implicit bias and in turn impact suspension and special education identification rates of minority students. Social emotional learning curriculum is yet another programmatic approach recommended to decrease disproportionality in discipline. I suggest future research to assess the implementation of social emotional learning curriculum and its impact on suspension and special education identification rates.

The pre-school-to prison pipeline is a problem of national proportion that needs to be addressed. With this qualitative case study, I researched the why behind the disproportionate discipline and special education identification of African American students beginning at the early elementary grades. I recommend future research to look at the implementation of the early interventions and its impact on the student progression longitudinally, from suspension to special education identification to restrictive placement. This research would discern the effectiveness of the interventions and if the disproportionality cycle is broken with the implementation of the alternative interventions. Additionally, future research could consider an across school levels disproportionality study once alternatives to suspension interventions are in place. This research would be longitudinal and begin with students in early elementary and follow them through to

high school to see if alternatives to suspension interventions impacts student achievement and decreases drop-out rates.

Conclusion

The significance of this study examining the disproportionate suspension and special education identification of students who are African American, in a large mid-Atlantic school system, has tremendous implications for not only Big Valley, but other school systems, and states across the nation who implement similar suspension bans. The ban, in and of itself, is not a solution to disproportionality. There are other implications for practice that reduce the influence of implicit bias on these vulnerable decision-making points. Implicit bias is a variable that needs to be mitigated in order to eliminate disproportionality. Our earliest learners being excluded from school, otherwise known as the "pre-school-to-prison pipeline" is a problem that requires attention. Most importantly it is the educators' job to be deliberate in equity to meet the needs of each and every learner to close the opportunity achievement gap.

Participants in this study shared that adverse childhood experiences, including trauma, are an impacting factor, beyond race, that needs to be addressed. They recommended ways to eliminate the disproportionality by having mental health professionals in every school, implementing social emotional learning curriculum that explicitly teaches students social skills and self-regulation, and using restorative practices, which are approaches to resolve conflict and prevent future harm. When educators use these recommended strategies, they can disrupt and dismantle the preschool-to-prison pipeline, eradicate suspensions, and mitigate the negative effects of implicit bias. Children do not suspend themselves; it takes an adult to do that. When educators focus on their own behavior, give children the tools they need to regulate their

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behavior, be aware of their own implicit bias, and look for what is good, right, and amazing in each and every single child; children can remain in school. I am encouraged that the outcomes of this study will inform Big Valley and other school district's future practice to eliminate disproportionality in suspension and special education identification of African American students.

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APPENDICES

A. Operating Procedures to Determine Suspension of Students Grades Pre-K–2

Defining Suspension and Expulsion

Regulation 400-04 (8/15/2017)

In-school Suspension: The removal within the school building of a student from the student's current education program for up to, but not more than, ten (10) school days in a school year for disciplinary reasons by the school principal.

Out-of-School Suspension: The removal of a student from the school, by the principal, for up to ten (10) school days for disciplinary reasons.

An in-school removal is not considered a day of suspension as long as the student is afforded the opportunity to continue to:
- Appropriately progress in the general curriculum;
- Receive the special education and related services specified on the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if the student is a student with a disability;
- Receive instruction commensurate with the program afforded to the student in the regular classroom; and
- Participate with peers as he/she would in his/her current education program to the extent appropriate.

Standard for Suspension of Students in Grades Pre-K-2:

A student enrolled in a public prekindergarten program, kindergarten, first grade or second grade may not be suspended or expelled. The law is effective July 1, 2017. Local Education Agencies are required to ensure that practice, policy, and local regulations related to suspensions and expulsions of students incorporate the provisions of the law.
- Expelled from school if required by federal law;
- **Suspended for not more than five (5) days if the school administration, in consultation with the school psychologist or other mental health professionals, determines that there is an imminent threat of serious harm to other students or staff that cannot be reduced or eliminated through interventions or supports.**

Schools are required to provide intervention and support to students who are suspended or who commit any act that would be considered an offense subject to suspension but for the student's grade.

The following MUST be in place *at the school level* BEFORE a suspension is considered:

Multi-tiered system for academic and behavior support that includes the following critical elements:

- An active Student Support Team to identify additional academic and behavior supports including
- Tier I, II, and III interventions and a manner to document interventions and supports, including the data related to the impact of these interventions and supports PBIS World
- An analysis of data for root causes and/or trends
- Parent engagement and relationships
- A BIP Team

The following SHOULD be considered BEFORE a suspension *of a specific student*:

- Document interventions and supports that have been attempted including the data related to the impact of these interventions and supports
- Solicit family support
- Consider the need for an Emergency Petition for evaluation and, if appropriate, contact the School
- Resource Officer
- Obtain releases of information and attempt to communicate with outside agencies (e.g., psychiatrist, therapist) if applicable
- Work collaboratively with the School Psychologist, school therapist, and/or behavior support specialist
- Work collaboratively with the Behavioral Intervention Team
- Work with Special Education Coordinator if appropriate

The following MUST be in place DURING the process of considering a suspension *of a specific student*:

- Work with the Instructional Director
- Work collaboratively with the School Psychologist, LCPC, or LCSW-C
- The School Psychologist/LCPC/LCSW-C and the building administrator will complete the attached form indicating support for or against the suspension
- If the student is suspended, 1 copy of the form will be kept by the building principal, 1 copy sent to the instruction director and, for those students receiving special education services or for students suspected of having a disability or who are in the process of determining the existence of a disability, 1 copy to the office of special education.

The following MUST be in place AFTER a suspension *of a specific student* has occurred:

1. While the student is out of the building on a suspension, school staff must meet as a collaborative problem-solving team (SST, IEP, and/or BIP team) to include as appropriate, the student's parent, general education teacher, administrator, school psychologist, school

counselor, school therapist, behavior support specialist, intervention teacher, and special education teacher and/or coordinator and:

    a. Analyze data for root causes and/or trends

    b. Consider appropriate Academic Supports

    c. Consider appropriate Behavioral Supports which may include initiating the FBA/BIP process and/or developing a specific plan to address behavioral challenges

    d. Document interventions and supports, including the data related to the impact of these interventions and supports

    e. Document who has responsibilities for each suggested intervention and supports

    f. Document what ongoing data will be collected

    g. Document when the team will meet again to review progress

    h. Create a specific plan to facilitate the student's return to school and develop a comprehensive plan to support the student and reduce the disruptive behavior

    i. Collaborate with parents to develop a comprehensive plan

    j. Collaborate with outside professionals if applicable

    k. A suspension letter must be sent to the parent/guardian

2. Central Office Support:

    a. If a school-based request is made for the Big Valley Behavioral Support Team, staff will make it a priority and respond and provide intensive consistent short-term support in an effort to modify the student's extreme behavior

    b. The school psychologist and/or the LCPC or LCSW-C will make it a priority to collaborate with the school team to develop a plan to modify the student's extreme behavior

    c. If appropriate, central office Special Education Staff will make it a priority to collaborate with the school team to develop a plan to modify the student's extreme behavior

    d. If appropriate, Special Education Services will streamline and prioritize the consideration of requests for supports for students demonstrating extreme behaviors

    e. The Instructional Directors will streamline and prioritize the consideration of requests for supports for students demonstrating extreme behaviors

B. Focus Group Protocol

Welcome

Welcome, I want to thank you for participating in this focus group related to disproportionality in suspension and special education identification of African American students. My name is Linda Chambers and I will be the facilitator for the group discussion. I am conducting research for a dissertation for a doctoral degree in organizational leadership at Hood College. _____ is also present today to take notes for us.

I invited you to take part in this group discussion today because you are staff who participate on school teams that make decisions using the process suspension consideration process when deciding if suspension is warranted for a Pre-K-Grade 2 student. I would like to talk with you today about your impressions of this process and disproportionality. I expect there to be different viewpoints and I know that you will agree to disagree with respect to one another.

What I learn from today's discussion will help me in my research related to disproportionality.

Ground Rules	Before we begin, I would like to review a few ground rules for the discussion.
	a. I am going to ask you a few questions and I do want everyone to take part in the discussion.
	b. Feel free to treat this as a discussion and respond to what others are saying, whether you agree or disagree. I am interested in your opinions and whatever you have to say is fine with me. There are no right or wrong answers. I am just asking for your opinions based on your own personal experience. I am are here to learn from you.
	c. If there is a particular question you do not want to answer, you don't have to.
	d. I will treat your answers confidentially. I am not going to ask for anything that could identify you and I only going to use first names during the discussion. I also ask that each of you respect the privacy of everyone in the room and not share or repeat what is said here in any way that could identify anyone in the room.
	e. I am audio recording the discussion today and also the notetaker will be taking notes. However, once we start the video and digital recorder I will not use anyone's full name and we ask that you do the same. Each of you signed an informed consent agreeing to be audio recorded.
	f. I will not include your names or any other information that could identify you in any reports that we write. I will destroy the notes and audio recording after we complete our study and publish the results.
Introductions	[start audio recording]
	I'd like to go around the room starting at my right and have each person introduce him or herself. Please tell us your first name only and your position.
Introduction Question	1. Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed.
	a. Do these behaviors present a challenge to your school team?
	b. Why do you think this is happening?
(RQ 1a) Group Discussion Topic 1 Influences on	2. I understand that these behaviors and responding to them may be playing out differently in your different schools. What steps do you take to respond to this concern?

decision-making
for
suspension/special
education referral

(RQ 1b) Group Discussion Topic 2 Program fidelity effectiveness in reducing suspension, can it be improved?	3. Describe your experiences with the suspension consideration process when considering discipline for your students? a. What does it look like in your school?
(RQ 1c) Group Discussion Topic 3 Implicit bias influence on decision-making in suspension and special education identification	4. If the only difference in 2 student discipline cases is race-based, talk about that. How does that play out in your school? What do you see, hear and do with that information? 5. Nationally, there is a pattern of student suspension leading to referral to special education. I am interested in the connection between discipline and special education identification of students. What are your thoughts about that process and the timeframe in which it happens?
Final thoughts	Summarize what I heard...ask if this is accurate. Those were all of the questions I wanted to ask. Does anyone have any final thoughts that they haven't gotten to share yet?
Review & Wrap-up	Thank you for coming today and sharing your opinions with me. I hope you enjoyed the discussions today.

C. Interview Protocol

I appreciate your time today and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I also understand how busy you are and value the time and effort you are sharing with me today. I hope that you feel comfortable being candid with me today because my goal is to understand your experiences in the disciplining and special education identification of our Pre-K- grade 2 students. Here is the consent form, please read it carefully before signing. Do you have any questions about the consent form? I encourage you to be candid in your responses and share as much or as little as you would like. At any point during the interview you may ask questions, share concerns, or stop the interview if you so desire. I will be audio recording today's interview in order to capture anything I miss while taking notes. Before we start, do you have any questions?

Please complete these initial survey questions:

1. What is your current position in the district?

   o Principal

   o Assistant Principal

   o School Psychologist

   o School-based mental health professional

   o Other _____

2. How many years have you been in this district?

   o 1-5
   o 6-10
   o 11-15
   o 16-20

o   20+

3. Identify your race/ethnic status

    o   African American

    o   American Indian

    o   Asian

    o   Hispanic or Latino

    o   Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

    o   Two or more races

    o   White

    o   Other _____

4. Identify your gender

    o   Female

    o   Male

5. List your professional credentials?

6. Briefly describe any diversity training in which you have participated.

Let's begin the interview.

"Start recording"

Here is the school-systems' current suspension and special education identification data *(Give a moment to review)*.

1. How does this systemic data make you feel?
2. What is your opinion about why this disproportionality is happening?

3. Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners that you have witnessed. PROBE: Why do you think this is happening?

4*(RQ 1a)*. What behaviors do the students demonstrate that your team believes warrants suspension?

5*(RQ 1a)*. What steps do you or your school team take when a student is displaying externalizing behaviors prior to suspending a student?

a. What types of interventions does your school team attempt prior to referring the student to special education?

　　　　　i. What influences a team to move to a special education screening meeting?

　　　　　　PROBE: Talk about the timeline for special education referral for these students. What does your school team consider when you move from suspension to special education referral?

6 *(RQ 1b)*. Describe your experiences completing the steps of the suspension consideration process when you are considering suspending a student who is Pre-K through grade 2.

　　a. How do people (e.g. you, teachers, parents) feel about the suspension consideration process?

　　b. Are there challenges related to completing the suspension consideration process? What are they?

　　c. What recommendations do you have to improve the suspension consideration process?

　　　　i. PROBE: What other interventions or supports do you think would be effective in reducing suspension disproportionality?

7*(RQ 1c)*. In front of you are 2 completed suspension consideration process documents for 2 different students. Review the two cases, what is your thinking when you review these 2 student's outcomes?

Note to self: The identifying information with the exception of race is redacted

8. Describe your thinking about the administrator and school-based mental health professional's decision-making to suspend Student A? Student B?

9. *RQ 1a, 1b, 1c)*. Describe how your participation in the suspension consideration process has changed your initial approaches to students who demonstrated challenging behaviors?

10. (*RQ 1a, 1b, 1c)*. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I have not asked with regard to the suspension consideration process, discipline or special education referral decision-making?

D. Suspension Consideration Process (Pre-K-2nd Grade Student)

Must be completed by a school psychologist or school based mental health professional –
LCSW-C or LCPC

Student Name: _____

School: _____

Grade: _____

Does the school have a Multi-tiered system for academic and behavior support that includes the following critical elements?

Yes	No	
☐	☐	An active Student Support Team to identify additional academic and behavior supports including Tier I, II, and III interventions and a manner to document interventions and supports, including the data related to the impact of these interventions and supports
☐	☐	An analysis of data for root causes and/or trends
☐	☐	A BIP Team

What interventions and supports have been attempted *specifically for this student*? Include the data related to the impact of these interventions and supports

_____

_____

_____

_____

Has the family been contacted for support?   Yes ☐ No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

Has an Emergency Petition been considered?　　　Yes ☐ No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

Has the School Resource Officer been contacted regarding this student? Yes ☐　　No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

Has school staff communicated with outside agencies (e.g., psychiatrist, therapist)? Yes ☐ No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

Has the school psychologist been contacted regarding this student?　　　Yes ☐ No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

Has the Big Valley Behavioral Intervention Team been contacted regarding this student?

Yes ☐　No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

Has the Special Education Coordinator been contacted regarding this student?　Yes ☐　　No ☐

What was the result?

_____

_____

At this time, there are no interventions or supports that can reduce or eliminate the threat of imminent harm.　True ☐

If "true' is not checked, list interventions and supports that could be put in place to eliminate the threat of imminent harm_____

_____
_____
_____

For very low frequency, high intensity behaviors, suspension may be considered to allow time for the school team to create a plan for the student to return to school and to address the disruptive behavior.

Disciplinary measures must align with Big Valley Regulation 400-08, *Discipline*. For students receiving special education services *or for students suspected of having a disability or who are in the process of determining the existence of a disability,* ensure compliance with Big Valley Regulation 400-17, *Suspension and Expulsion – Students with Disabilities*."

_____   _____
Name: Date

_____

E. Staff Email and Informed Consent Document

Good _____,

I hope this email finds you well.

Currently, I am enrolled in Hood College's Doctorate of Organizational Leadership Program. My research is on the disproportionate suspension and special education identification of African American students in the early elementary grades. Disparate discipline and special education identification of African American students has been extensively documented showing a relationship between race/ethnic status and suspension/special education identification rates; yet the reasons for the disparities are less well understood. These disproportionality statistics for early elementary students are on the rise triggering states to consider suspension bans for elementary students, yet there is limited research related to disproportionality and alternative interventions in this age group. The hope is data collected in this study will provide insight into why this is happening, how we can eliminate this disproportionality, and how we can improve our processes and programming to meet the early elementary learners needs both social-emotionally and behaviorally.

I am seeking **volunteers** who are a part of the Consideration for Suspension for Students Pre-K-Grade 2 decision-making teams in your school to participate in a 1 hour focus group and a 1 hour semi-structured individual interview to occur between September 2018 and October 2018.

Your participation is strictly voluntary and will be confidential.

If interested please submit your interest at this link: Focus Group/Interview Volunteer .Thank you,

Sincerely,

Linda

Informed Consent

Introduction and Purpose
Thank you for participating in a research study about *Disproportionality in Suspension and Special Education Identification, particularly in the elementary grades*. This study is being conducted by Linda Chambers (Primary Researcher), in affiliation with Hood College, as a part of her doctoral program. *It is not part of a study or feedback for Big Valley.*

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is **voluntary.** Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Primary Researcher.

Duration

The focus group and interview are each anticipated to take approximately 1 hour. It will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon public location. You will participate in the focus group first and then we will schedule an individual interview at a mutually agreeable time for you. You may be asked in the future follow up question or for clarification via email contact from the primary researcher.

Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in a focus group (@ 1 hour long) where the group will be asked a series of questions to describe their perception of decision-making with regard to suspension and special education referral of Pre-K - Grade 2 students. You do not need to answer any question you do not wish to answer. As the primary researcher conducts the focus group, notes will be taken. If you give consent, the primary researcher will audio record the focus group, solely to support the note-taking process.
- Participate in an individual semi-structured interview (@ 1 hour long) where you will be asked a series of questions to describe their perception of decision-making with regard to suspension and special education referral of Pre-K - Grade 2 students. You do not need to answer any question you do not wish to answer. As the primary researcher conducts the interview, notes will be taken. If you give consent, the primary researcher will audio record the interview, solely to support the note-taking process.

Risks and Benefits
There are minimal risks involved in the study as you will be discussing personal views on professional matters with your professional peers. The beneficial outcomes the primary researcher anticipates are that you may gain an increased understanding of your own views on the topic being explored, gain a greater awareness of the Hood College doctoral program, and support a valuable education initiative in the school system and community. A benefit to your participation can inform future decision making, process reform, and further inform future research related to suspension and special education identification of African American students. An additional benefit will be a 10-dollar gift card to Starbucks.

Compensation
You will receive a gift card for your participation. This gift card will be a 10-dollar gift card to Starbucks.

Confidentiality
Although you will be in a focus group with peers discussing your personal views on the topic, the storage of the data provided as part of this study will be confidential and will be protected to the fullest extent.   Audio recording files will be kept on a password-protected computer. Your identity will be protected and the information you provide will not be used or shared outside the doctoral dissertation. I will maintain confidentiality of all research materials and products (e.g. poster sessions,). All data will be destroyed after the study is published.

Right to Withdraw

Participation is completely **<u>voluntary</u>**. You may decide to stop taking part in the focus group/interview at any time. Withdrawal from the focus group/interview will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise permitted.

Points of Contact

If you have any additional concerns or questions about the focus group/interview and how the information will be used, you are free to contact me at 301-606-0105 or at <u>ljm4@hood.edu</u>. An additional point of contact for questions or concerns is Dr. Diane Graves, Hood Internal Review Board, and she can be contacted at 301-696-3963 or at graves@hood.edu.

 Signatures

By signing this informed consent, you as a participant agree that you understand the purpose and outcomes of the interview and how the information will be used, which has been explained to you. * *If NO is checked you will be excluded from the study.*

   I give consent to be audio recorded (focus group and interview): _____ YES _____ NO

Participant Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Participant Full Name: _____

As the research interviewer, I have explained the terms described above and believe the participant understands them fully.

Researcher Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher Full Name: _____

F: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Position	Years in the System	Certification	Diversity Training
Laila	Female	Caucasian	Principal	11-15	Masters in ed leadership, 24 years in education	CP Student Services Team process
Bob	Male	Caucasian	School Psychologist	11-15	Bachelors in Psychology, Masters in School Psychology, Education Specialist, Certified school psychologist in MD	Staff meetings and outside conferences focusing on diversity in schools.
Jane	Female	Caucasian	Principal	20+	BA in special ed; MA in early childhood; Certificate in ed leadership; 3rd year doctoral student	Cultural Proficiency
Michael	Male	Caucasian	Assistant Principal	16-20	Masters of Ed with School Leadership focus (Admin I & II),	Ruby Payne, Education that is Multicultural, Cultural Proficiency
Jeff	Male	Caucasian	School Psychologist	0-5	licensed psychologist, nationally certified school psychologist	Graduate course in diverse issues in psychology
Elizabeth	Female	Caucasian	Assistant Principal	11-15	Masters Education.; Admin 1 & 2	Education that is Multicultural ETMA rep
Judy	Female	Caucasian	Assistant Principal	11-15	Masters of Education, Reading Specialist PK-12, Admin I/II, Special Education, Elementary and Middle School	School System Cultural proficiency training
Lorraine	Female	Caucasian	Assistant Principal	11-15	Masters in curriculum and design, reading recovery certification, admin certification	Culturally Proficient training Cultural Competency, Ruby Payne training
Shawn	Male	African American	School Psychologist	6-20	licensed psychologist, Educational Specialist	Participated in trainings on sexual orientation

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Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Position	Years in the System	Certification	Diversity Training
Grace	Female	Caucasian	Principal	20+	BA in Elementary Education; MA in Counselor Education; Admin I and II Certification	Course at college on Diversity; Cultural Proficiency; Ruby Payne Training
Martha	Female	Caucasian	Principal	11-15	Masters in Instructional Leadership, Hood College- Admin 1 & 2 certified	Cultural Proficiency training
Sarah	Female	African American	Principal	20+	Master's Degree- Educational Leadership/ Advanced Professional Certificate, 3rd year doctoral candidate	County provided cultural proficiency/ Ruby Payne
Leslie	Female	Caucasian	Assistant Principal	0-5	Admin I, Admin II, Elementary Education, Middle Grades 6-8, Middle School Mathematics, Ancillary Special Education	Training through, Campbell Jones, Coalition of Essential Schools, C-Drum, PBIS
Donna	Female	Caucasian	School Psychologist	11-15	MSDE Certified School Psychologist; Nationally Certified School Psychologist	Ruby Payne; Cultural Competence workshops and training as it relates to working with families and assessment of students
Christine	Female	Caucasian	Principal	16-20	Masters in Curriculum and Instruction, Elementary Education and Middle School, Special Education, Certification in Administration I and II	Cultural Proficiency Training, Ruby Payne
Denise	Female	Caucasian	Principal	11-15	Masters of Educational Leadership Administrator I and II	School System Cultural Proficiency Training, Ruby Payne
Angela	Female	Caucasian	Principal	20+	B.S. Psychology; M.A. School Administration	The county's Cultural Proficiency training, Ruby Paine to be a trainer for other staff members

G. Charting Sample

Focus Group-Coding Round 1:	
Q1: Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed.	
Name	Response
1. Jane Michael Bob	**Jane:** Wow. Everything from I don't feel like following the teacher's direction, like have a seat or get your pencil or whatever, which with the little guys I attribute to I haven't been in school very much I don't understand how to do that to students with severe issues. A kindergartner that we had a couple of years ago that was violent towards staff, violent towards himself, disruptive in the classroom, is now in second grade doing beautifully. A range of behaviors. I see children who are anxious, I see children who are noncompliant beyond I don't know what to do or I don't understand what to do. Verbal, physical, kinds of responses. Sometimes physical towards other students because they don't quite understand how to interact with other students or they do, and that is their choice to interact that way. I don't want to answer the longest.

Michael: A lot of times it comes down to communication. I see our youngest learners with gaps in not only how to be in school but how to communicate with others. That will lead to physical issues with kids.

Michael: It'll happen quickly. Yes, my experiences are everything that you've said, small typical disruptions in classrooms, up until major physical activity versus teacher or peer.

Bob: A lot of these kids don't have the skills modeled for them either from not coming from a preschool setting or having them modeled for them in the home setting. I talked a lot about mental illness in the home that goes untreated or undiagnosed and those behaviors I feel are oftentimes just learned, and they're made more into an actual diagnosis later. QUOTE: I feel a lot of it is just learned behaviors at a young age, some psychological, medical, or genetic components too, but at a young age they're very impressionable, and if they don't have the positive experiences, then they come here behind the eight ball.

Michael: I agree. I see a lot of lack of experience and lack of preparedness to be in schools with our youngest kids, pre-K, K.

Jane: QUOTE: It's actually kind of interesting because my experiences at one school were 75 to 90% of them actually came with some preschool experience because we provided it. They might've been in it. They might've been in Head Start. They might've been in pre-K. Whereas in my current school, which is not title 1, it's 10% farm, so primarily mid to upper middle class, students come in with zero preschool, zero outside of the home experience. Not all of them, but a much larger percentage than I anticipated. They have the ability, but the kindergarten teachers in particular are spending a lot of time with teaching those things that are typical for school and how to get along with other children because they just haven't had that experience yet. |

	Q1: Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed. Focus Group-Coding Round 1
Name	Response
Shawn Martha Sarah	Shawn: In the classrooms that I've been in, I've seen a lot of refusal, a lot of hitting.
	Sarah: [inaudible 00:01:09], playing the promises. Yelling.
	Shawn: From my opinion, a lot look like they haven't really had ... hadn't been taught school expected behaviors. Maybe like that is a part of the challenge of getting new first grade kindergarteners, where there is teaching some of them and the process of teaching them other skills as well.
	Martha: Dis-regulation. Unable to regulate from their bodies or their feelings from one moment to the next, one task to the next.
	Sarah: Time articulating what's going on. I don't see all the hard time expressing, how they're upset and they do that through physical ways. They're not able to use their words. Name calling and pushing. This then leads to other instances.
	Shawn: Injuring.
	Martha: Even sometimes very delayed behaviors like eating glue or putting scissors in your mouth, things that you would typically expect maybe a one or two year old to not understand the safety aspects of things or that risk, they don't understand that. Or maybe they do, and they're doing it for attention, but I've seen kids eating glue and putting crayons in their mouths, pencils and biting the tips off of pencils.
Denise Donna Angela Christine	Denise: We have kids running around the classroom, jumping off of furniture, spitting at students and adults, kicking, throwing objects, throwing furniture.
	Angela: Eloping.

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Q1: Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed.

Focus Group-Coding Round 1

Name	Response
Denise Donna Angela Christine	Donna: Choking. Christine: I haven't this year, but I have had students take their clothes off. Denise: That's true. Christine: Yeah, we had a student expose himself, actually two students this week, to other students. Angela: And I would say we've had aggression towards staff and students this year, probably equally, as I look at our data. Researcher: How does that aggression look like? Observable behavior. Angela: It's swatting at staff, because it's our younger students so they're not throwing punches yet, kicking, trying to get way, doing the same things to other students, throwing objects and purposefully looking at students and almost targeting certain students when they wanna throw something at them. Researcher: And you said pinching? Angela: Pinching, kicking, Biting.
Jeff Elizabeth Grace	Grace: I have students who do a lot of eloping out of the classroom. Work avoidance behaviors. I'm trying to think of the one set of my population before I shift to the other side. A lot of kind of like aggressive towards property. Looking like their gonna tip a desk over, throwing objects. Researcher: And Grace when you say I'm going to talk about one population first, is the population you just talked about in your general program? Grace: In my general ed side, yes. Researcher: And you also have a specialized program. Grace: Yes. Researcher: In your school. Grace: Yes, with students who have come to my school through the county IEP process and they come because they have not been successful in their home schools and their behaviors were extremely disruptive and impeded their success in their home school. Researcher: And Grace do their behaviors that you see demonstrated look different than what you described just now in terms of elopement, work avoidance, aggression towards property, is there a different level of behavior that you see in those students? Grace: Similar behaviors, but we also see physically aggressive towards students and staff. I recently had a student, first time there that threw a chair through a window.

Q1: Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed. Focus Group-Coding Round 1	
Response	
Grace:	Yes, with students who have come to my school through the county IEP process and they come because they have not been successful in their home schools and their behaviors were extremely disruptive and impeded their success in their home school.
Researcher:	And Grace do their behaviors that you see demonstrated look different than what you described just now in terms of elopement, work avoidance, aggression towards property, is there a different level of behavior that you see in those students?
Grace:	Similar behaviors, but we also see ==physically aggressive towards students and staff. I recently had a student, first time there that threw a chair through a window==.
Elizabeth:	And I'm seeing the same, our population is a typical population, we don't have a specialized program at our school in terms of emotional. There's no emotional component to our specialized program. We have have a Pre-K specialized program but we're seeing the same thing. We've got some students right now, about four of them who are on the primary side. ==Physical aggression towards staff and students, elopement==. The same sorts of behaviors. Certainly, work avoidance and those kinds of things.
	I was saying to Luke when we were standing outside, some of the behaviors that we're seeing are more intense then the behaviors that we've seen in the last couple of years.
Jeff:	I agree, at my schools my two elementary schools. Similar, severe behaviors, right? Eloping from your area or from the classroom or school. ==Yelling, tantrum-ing kind of behavior, and then aggression towards other kids or adults==.
Grace:	Quote: It's interesting you mention the tantruming because that's a lot of what it reminds me of, is that some of these kids it's almost like they got stuck in that toddler phase and they have not learned to cope. So, it's kind of, they're given a direction and I'm gonna tantrum. It is really like; the development does not match the age.

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Question Number: 1. Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed.
Focus Group-Coding Round 1 & 2

	Noncompliance/refusal	Physical against students and staff (pinching, kicking, biting, spitting, choking)	Yelling, Vulgarity	Self-harm (eating glue, sticking scissors in mouth)	Elopement	Crawling under furniture, dropping to the ground, lack of spatial awareness
Jane Michael Bob	X	X				
Shawn Martha Sarah	X	X	X	X		
Denise Donna Angela Christine	X	X	X		X	X
Jeff Elizabeth Grace	X	X	X		X	
TOTAL	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	2(50%)	1 (25%)

Executive summary: Focus group respondents across focus groups when asked to describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed indicated in 100% of the responses as noncompliance/refusal and physical aggression toward staff and other students. Seventy-five percent of responses indicated yelling and vulgarity as student behaviors witnesses. Elopement was noted in 50% of the responses. One focus group discussed student self-harm (eating glue, sticking scissors in mouth) and crawling under furniture, dropping to the ground with a ack of spatial awareness by our youngest learners.

Themes: Physical aggression, refusal/non-compliance, elopement-All safety issues

Focus Group Note-taking Sheet-October 25, 2018
Note taker: Anonymous   Facilitator: Researcher
Participants: Shawn, Martha, Sarah
*Observations can be a particular quote, people's reactions to questions, body language, quiet versus not, etc.

Time	Question	Observation	Comments
5:16	Describe the externalizing behaviors demonstrated by primary elementary learners you have witnessed. a. Do these behaviors present a challenge to your school team? b. Why do you think this is happening?	ALL: Thoughtful-head nodding Using hand gestures. Looking at others seeking approval/agreement from others present.	Refusal, hitting, fleeing, yelling. Lack of school expected behaviors. Needs to be taught. Dysregulation from moment to moment; task to task. Difficulty expression upset-emotions. They do in a physical manner. Name calling and pushing. Delayed behaviors-eating glue; putting scissors- don't understand risk associated with behaviors. Biting tips off pencils. Challenges-staff, support teams, principals, counselors-don't have skills to interact in a proactive manner. Then frustrations ensued and this frustrates students. The level of disruption makes it challenging. Teacher are not able to teach content and academic skills because of having to spend a great deal of time teaching these things Parents don't understand why the child isn't removed when they hit or demonstrate dangerous or disrespectful behaviors. Adult staff don't understand why they are allowed to stay in school. It takes time to develop programs and supports for one child-then multiply by the number of incidents that need to be addressed in the right manner. Teacher feels badly for the other students and sorry for the student with the issue. Why? Lack of exposure to other students, behavioral expectations-wasn't a need or an opportunity. Societal lures-video games, lack of exposure to social interactions; fast paced nature of tv, and a need for instant gratification. Schools haven't changed, but the kids have. Lack of time for training for teachers and parents. Students have mental health issues or lack of parenting. "Distracted parenting." Technology is distracting parents as well as kids. Trauma ACES factors. Must reshape behavior because of the impact of these things on the brain. Censored topics and materials are being seen before the 5:00 hour.

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Focus Group Note-taking Sheet-October 25, 2018
Note taker: Anonymous   Facilitator: Researcher
Participants: Shawn, Martha, Sarah
*Observations can be a particular quote, people's reactions to questions, body language, quiet versus not, etc.

Time	Question	Observations	Comments
5:24	Describe your experiences with the Consideration for Suspension of PreK-Grade 2 process when considering discipline for your students? a. What does it look like in your school?	Sarah-Pensively stares with sadness MS-Head nodding	Shawn-had to consider it for a student who brought something to school that they really shouldn't have. It was warranted. Something that's very severe. Developmentally, not sure the child processed it as a consequence. Martha-Used as a time for the team to regroup and get supports ready for the child, for safety reasons, to be successful.
5:27	If the only difference in 2 student discipline cases is race-based, talk about that. How does that play out in your school? What do you see, hear and do with that information?	Looked down or stared off, deep in though	Shawn-would find it frustrating and appalling! Thinks there is a bias that the school team is not aware of. Would facilitate the writing of plans that allow or a little more objectivity. Has heard students say, "That was racist action against me." He tries to have the student unpack the action and the reason for the response. He hasn't ever seen it in action... Sarah-sees AA boys who are victimized all the time. It's frustrating. In a building where she hired 95% of staff yet she still saw it after training and thinking the folks she selected we are aware. Has encouraged strategies-relevant resources, instructional practices or building relationships. It's in the county data so something is awry. Spoken with a teacher who really couldn't connect with AA boys. Made strategic adjustments and counseling on culturally proficient strategies. They end up at my school in the Pyramid Program.

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Focus Group Note-taking Sheet-October 25, 2018
Note taker: Anonymous   Facilitator: Researcher
Participants: Shawn, Martha, Sarah
*Observations can be a particular quote, people's reactions to questions, body language, quiet versus not, etc.

Time	Question	Observations	Comments
5:45	5. Nationally, there is a pattern of student suspension leading to referral to special education. I am interested in the connection between discipline and special education identification of students. What are your thoughts about that process and the timeframe in which it happens?	Giggly, sheepish grin, honest frank response.	Sarah-There are questions that lead you to consider some components of culture. Someone with a keen eye needs to go in, who is trained in culturally responsive discipline strategies. Needs to be done proactively, not when headed to special education. The curriculum needs to reflect culturally relevant/proficient content and strategies. Has to be an external person who has no skin in the game to be completely objective. At last school had a low referral rate. Had clearly defined tiers of interventions through RTI. The interventionist were highly trained and took their intervention seriously. Interventionist provided training to the staff to help other teachers know and learn strategies. Is staffing appropriate to have levels of interventions in place so that it can be an alternative to referral. Would like to see county's data for per pupil expenditure and staffing model who do not have over identification. The only way students can get services at the elementary level is through special education. There is generally 1 literacy specialist or 1 math specialist and minimal IA support to deliver interventions. Martha-built in supports and training to employee before having to make a weighty decision about next step hn he behaviors are so intense. Shawn-when a student involves up to 4-5 adults in a behavioral situation, something will suffer. When developing the plan to support self regulation, the question becomes, who is going to do it?Student often need more than a few minutes (15) to deliver the teaching for their limited skills.
6:14	[Facilitator Recap] Summarize what I heard...ask if this is accurate. Those were all of the questions I wanted to ask. Does anyone have any final thoughts that they haven't gotten to share yet?	Lots of head nodding in agreement.	

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I: Big Valley Suspension Consideration Document Analysis

Document	Student	Grade	Gender	Ethnicity	Sped	Disability	Behavior	Date of Incident	Date Form Completed	Interventions	Suspended	School
1	A	1	M	White	N		Attack on adult	11/1/18	11/2/18	SST, Emergency Petition, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, Contact outside therapist, parent involve, SRO	Y	AA
2	A	1	M	White	N		Attack on student	12/6/18	12/7/18	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, Contact outside therapist, parent involve, SRO	Y	AA
3	B	2	M	White	N		Disruption, Destruction of Property	10/2/18	10/2/18	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, Contact outside therapist, parent involve, SRO	Y	AA
4	B	1	M	White	N		Threat to adult	3/1/19	3/1/19	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO	Y	AA
5	C	1	M	White	N		Attack on student	12/21/18	12/21/18	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, Contact outside therapist, parent involve, SRO, Student Threat Assessment	Y	AA
6	D	2	M	AA	N		Attack on adult	10/4/18	10/25/18	Family contact only	Y	BB
7	E	1	F	AA	In screening	suspect ED	Attack on adult	12/14/18	12/14/18	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, consult special education coordinator	Y	CC
8	E	1	F	AA	In screening	suspect ED	Attack on adult	3/12/19	3/12/19	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, consult special education coordinator	Y	CC
9	F	2	M	AA	Y	ED	Attack on student	11/30/18	date entry blank	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, just came off. hospitalization	Y	DD
10	G	2	M	AA	N		Attack on adult	1/7/19	1/7/19	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, consult special education coordinator, parent involve, SRO	Y	EE
11	H	2	M	White	Y	Autism	Attack on student	12/3/18	12/3/18	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, consult special education coordinator, parent involve, SRO	Y	FF
12	I	2	M	White	Y	Autism	Attack on adult	10/12/18	10/12/18	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, consult special education coordinator, parent involve	Y	GG
13	J	2	M	White	Y	ED	Attack on adult	2/1/19	2/1/19	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, just came off. Hospitalization, Emergency petition	Y	EE
14	J	2	M	White	Y	ED	Attack on adult	3/18/19	3/18/19	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, just came off. Hospitalization, Emergency petition	Y	EE
15	K	2	M	White	N		class cutting	1/3/19	date entry blank	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, just came off. Hospitalization, Emergency petition	Y	HH
16	K	2	M	White	N		Attack on adult	3/19/19	3/19/19	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, just came off. Hospitalization, Emergency petition	Y	HH
17	L	K	F	White	N		Attack on adult	12/18/19	12/18/18	Behavior card, , FBA,BIP, school counselor support, non-contingent breaks, parent contact, consult school psychologist, Big Valley behavior team called to support,	Y	EE
18	M	2	M	White	Y	ED	Threat to student	1/24/19	1/24/19	cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, Emergency petition	Y	EE
19	N	2	M	White	Y	ED	Attack on adult	3/15/19	3/15/19	SST, Root Cause, BIP, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, cconsult behavior specialist, consult school psychologist, parent involve, SRO, just came off. Hospitalization, Emergency petition	Y	AA

KEY: SST=Student Services Team, Root Cause Analysis, BIP=Behavior Intervention Plan, SRO=School Resource Officer, Tier I, Tier II & Tier III=tiered levels of intervention to support behavior, Emergency Petition=sent to medical facility for assessment, ED-emotional disability

J: Third-Tier Code Mapping: Semi-Structured Interviews

Third-Tier Code Mapping: Semi-Structured Interviews			
Interview Question: Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?	First-Tier: Initial Descriptive Codes from Surface Analysis	Second-Tier: Pattern Variables	Third-Tier Interpretation
Q4 (RQ1)	-Physical Aggression (repetitive) -Bring inappropriate materials (i.e. weapons) -Sexual Behaviors -Explicit language -Inconvenience parent -Need a break to plan for student safe return -Verbal threat warrants threat assessment -Repetitive disrespect and classroom disruption	-Physical Aggression -Bring inappropriate materials (weapon) -Inconvenience parent -Need time to develop a plan for student safe return	Suspensions were predominantly documented as serious imminent threat to students or staff including severe aggressive behavior. Suspension is implemented to develop a plan for student safe return and to inconvenience parent so they become more involved.
Q5 (RQ1)	- Team with school staff to problem solve- - Positive reinforcement- Check in with student, breaks, token board, etc. -Functional Behavior Assessment/Behavior Intervention Plan -Special Education Referral -Behavior support specialist/Other central office support -Explicitly teach social skills/Zones of Regulation -Progressive Discipline/Restorative Practices -Cool down space in the classroom or outside the classroom -Restraint -First responders to behavior	-Team with school staff to problem solve- - Positive reinforcement-Check in with student, breaks, token board, etc. -Functional Behavior Assessment/Behavior Intervention Plan -Behavior support specialist/Other central office support -Explicitly teach social skills/Zones of Regulation -Progressive Discipline/Restorative Practices	School teams respond to behavior using interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted.
Q5b (RQ1)	-Engage the parent - Student Services team -School-based and Central Office Support-Behavior Specialist -Academic/ behavioral interventions - Try everything, exhaust all resources before consider special ed -Relationship building -only way to get resources or programming is to identify special ed	-School-based and Central Office Support-Behavior Specialist -Academic/ behavioral interventions -Try everything, exhaust all resources before consider special ed	
Q6 (RQ2)	50% Yes 50% No	Experiences with Suspension process-quotes/examples	School teams discussed traumatic events experienced by students impact them in a way that manifests as behavior that may or may not have school

			teams consider a referral to special education.
Q6a (RQ2)	- Understood why the decision was made, suspension not a solution - Frustrated, tie administrator hands, with not resources to support keeping students in school - Lose leverage with parents, lose ability to inconvenience parent - Just a compliance process, paperwork	- Frustrated, tie administrator hands, with not resources to support keeping students in school	School teams indicated frustration with the suspension consideration process as they felt it tied their hands without providing resources to support keeping students in school as an alternative.
Q6b (RA2)	- Completed in the midst of the crisis, may be better as an SST for behavior - No challenges, Like the process, talks about interventions prior to suspension - Time consuming - Each administrator has a subjective lens	Completed in the midst of the crisis, may be better as an SST for behavior	School teams recommended the following to eliminate disproportionality: a behavior specialist, therapist, or school psychologist in every building, and a school-based staff dedicated to cultural proficiency training in each building. Suspensions decisions were made quickly in close proximity to the crisis situation
Q6c (RQ2)	-Process be preintervention, rather than during the process -Define serious and imminent threat	-Process be preintervention, rather than during the process	
Q9 (RQ1,2,3)	- Behavioral support specialist/therapist/school psychologist in every school - System wide Social emotional learning curriculum -Short-term, temporary program to teach social emotional learning -11 month teacher for every school for cultural proficiency/cultural confidence/training to work with difficult students -Mental health supports and parent training for students, families and community in the school - In school discipline option, or other restorative practices - Smaller class sizes - African American Advocacy group for students and families - Honest cultural conversations with students and families	Behavioral support specialist/therapist/school psychologist in every school - System wide Social emotional learning curriculum 11 month teacher for every school for cultural proficiency/cultural confidence/training to work with difficult students -Mental health supports and parent training for students, families and community in the school	School teams respond to behavior using interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted. School teams discussed traumatic events experienced by students impact them in a way that manifests as behavior that may or may not have school teams consider a referral to special education.
Q10 (RQ1,2,3)	-No, hasn't changed my approach -Yes, more cognizant of when behavior starts, what interventions are tried, etc.	-No, hasn't changed my approach	
Q11 (RQ1,2,3)	-No - Having supports for students who are not IEP or 504 - Teach how to teach ED students/train specialized programs	- Implicit bias noted between races of students - Training for teachers to understand trauma and behaviors - Need tiered interventions for behavior and training	School staff could identify implicit bias in discipline decision-making and special education identification of others.

	- Partner with local colleges to improve teacher training programs - Hire staff to handle the administrivia of special education compliance - Implicit bias noted between races of students - Training for teachers to understand trauma and behaviors - Suspension is not an effective strategy for negative behaviors - Need tiered interventions for behavior and training		School teams discussed traumatic events experienced by students impact them in a way that manifests as behavior that may or may not have school teams consider a referral to special education.

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K: Third-Tier Code Mapping: Semi-Structured Focus Groups

Appendix K Third Tier Code Mapping: Semi-Structured Focus Groups			
Focus Group Question: Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?	First-Tier: Initial Descriptive Codes from Surface Analysis	Second-Tier: Pattern Variables	Third-Tier Interpretation
Q2 (RQ1)	-Discuss at Student Services Team (SST) - First Responder group all call when behavior interferes with learning - Help from Central Office, behavioral specialist, school psychologist - Communicate early & often with parents - Check in person with student, take breaks, change student schedule, token board, visuals, social stories - FBA/BIP process - Restorative Practices - Social Emotional Curriculum. Zones of Regulation	-Discuss at Student Services Team (SST) - First Responder group all call when behavior interferes with learning Communicate early & often with parents - Check in person with student, take breaks, change student schedule, token board, visuals, social stories - FBA/BIP process - Restorative Practices - Social Emotional Curriculum. Zones of Regulation	School teams respond to behavior using interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted.
Q3 (RQ2)	- Used process, consider interventions tried, need to buy time in midst of crisis to make a plan for the student return - Restorative practice after suspension-reintroduce student, including disability awareness - Students suspended pattern go to a specialized program or nonpublic school - Suspension sends the parent a message -Behavior so serious, emergency petition to hospital for help from school	Used process, consider interventions tried, need to buy time in midst of crisis to make a plan for the student return - Restorative practice after suspension-reintroduce student, including disability awareness - Students suspended pattern go to a specialized program or nonpublic school -Behavior so serious, emergency petition to hospital for help from school	Suspension is implemented to develop a plan for student safe return and to inconvenience parent so they become more involved. Patterns of suspension lead to quick student special education identification and placement in more restrictive instructional programs in order to get needed resources. School teams respond to behavior using interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted.
Q4 (RQ3)	- Poverty-inner-city schools, suspension with students who want control-like they have at home - Authority figures in school (teachers, admin) don't look like	- Poverty-inner-city schools, suspension with students who want control-like they have at home - Authority figures in school (teachers, admin) don't look like	School staff could identify implicit bias in discipline decision-making and special education identification of others.

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	the minority students-implicit race bias -in decisions, difficulty building relationships with students that do not look like them - Never crossed the mind of the Caucasian administrator, that this was happening - Differential teacher treatment of students of different race - Bias that staff isn't aware of-need to discuss awareness - See a trend of students of color in specialized, more restrictive placements -Not a race issue, more the teacher issue of expectations. -Need ACES training, beyond race-trauma needs to be addressed	the minority students-implicit race bias -in decisions, difficulty building relationships with students that do not look like them - - Differential teacher treatment of students of different race - Bias that staff isn't aware of-need to discuss awareness - See a trend of students of color in specialized, more restrictive placements -Not a race issue, more the teacher issue of expectations. -Need ACES training, beyond race-trauma needs to be addressed	School teams discussed traumatic events experienced by students impact them in a way that manifests as behavior that may or may not have school teams consider a referral to special education. Patterns of suspension lead to quick student special education identification and placement in more restrictive instructional programs in order to get needed resources.
Q5 (RQ3)	-Process is slower than before, have more resources - Teacher pressure the process of testing for special ed b/c they want the student out of their room - Test to get student to a more restrictive environment so can get therapeutic supports, can't get resources if not special ed - Need to add culturally responsive strategies into the curriculum - Provide interventions prior to testing-testing not needed then-higher referrals where less resources	- Test to get student to a more restrictive environment so can get therapeutic supports, can't get resources if not special ed - Teacher pressure the process of testing for special ed b/c they want the student out of their room - Need to add culturally responsive strategies into the curriculum - Provide interventions prior to testing-testing not needed then-higher referrals where less resources	Patterns of suspension lead to quick student special education identification and placement in more restrictive instructional programs in order to get needed resources. School staff could identify implicit bias in discipline decision-making and special education identification of others.

L: Third-Tier Code Mapping: Document Analysis

Appendix L Third Tier Code Mapping: Document Analysis			
Document Sections: Central Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?	First-Tier: Initial Descriptive Codes from Surface Analysis	Second-Tier: Pattern Variables	Third-Tier Interpretation
(RQ1)	-See Appendix I Document Analysis	-Discipline decisions were made within the same day, or the next day after the discipline incident. -Eight-nine percent of suspensions were documented as incidences of imminent threat of serious harm including attacks on students and adults. Eleven percent were not. -All completed documents resulted in out of school suspensions.	Suspensions decisions were made quickly in close proximity to the crisis situation Suspensions were predominantly documented as serious imminent threat to students or staff including severe aggressive behavior.
(RQ3)	-See Appendix I Document Analysis Chart	-The 2019 completed forms were for students in the first and second grade, with one outlier from kindergarten. -Eleven students were male. Two students were females. -Fifty percent of the students suspended had a disabling condition, either an emotional disability or autism.	Although the suspension rates significantly declined, African American early elementary students are being suspended disproportionately. School staff could identify implicit bias in discipline decision-making and special education identification of others.
(RQ4)	-See Appendix I Document Analysis Chart	-One student was in the midst of a special education referral at the incidence of the suspension. This student had a pattern of behavioral incidences of physical aggression in school year 2019. -Twenty-nine percent of the suspended students were African American, 69% were non-African American. -Ninety-five percent of all suspension consideration forms documented an extensive list of response interventions attempted to reduce or eliminate the imminent threat of harm. -Suspension consideration documents that resulted in suspension of primary elementary students came from eight elementary schools. Big Valley has a total of thirty-eight elementary schools. Seven of the student suspensions were from three of the study participants' schools. -Four of the fourteen students were suspended twice each during the school year. -Two of the eight elementary schools had more than one student suspended.	The suspension consideration process significantly decreased suspension rates, but the rate of those suspended who were special education or identified into special education did not decline. Although the suspension rates significantly declined, African American early elementary students are being suspended disproportionately.

M: Matrix of Research Questions, Findings, Data, Literature Alignment

Research Questions	Findings	Data				Literature Review
Overarching Question: What is the impact of the suspension consideration process?	*Findings*	DA	I	FG	S & SEI	Congruence
1. What influences school teams in their decision-making to decide if the suspension is warranted for students in Pre-K through Grade 2?	Suspensions decisions were made quickly, in close proximity to the crisis situation.	✓	✓	✓		
	Suspensions were predominantly documented as serious imminent threat to students or staff including severe aggressive behavior.	✓	✓	✓		
	Suspension is implemented to develop a plan for student safe return and to inconvenience parent so they become more involved.		✓	✓		
	School teams discussed traumatic events experienced by students impact them in a way that manifests as behavior that may or may not have school teams consider a referral to special education.		✓	✓		
2. What are the perceptions of the professionals implementing the suspension consideration process about the fidelity, the suspension consideration process' effectiveness in reducing suspension and how the process can be improved?	School teams indicated frustration with the suspension consideration process as they felt it tied their hands without providing resources to support keeping students in school as an alternative.		✓	✓		
	School teams recommended the following to eliminate disproportionality: a behavior specialist, therapist, or school psychologist in every building, and a school-based staff dedicated to cultural proficiency training in each building.		✓	✓		
3. In what ways does implicit bias influence decision-making in suspension and special education identification of African American students?	School staff could identify implicit bias in discipline decision-making and special education referral/dentification decision-making of other staff.	✓	✓	✓		✓ e.g., Cameron, Payne, & Knobe, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016; Ginwright 2004; Lai, Hoffman, & Nosek, 2013; Lee, Lindquist, & Payne, 2018; Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Rudd, 2014 Staats, 2016
4. What is the impact of the implementation of the suspension	Patterns of suspension lead to quick student special education		✓	✓		✓ e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Bussing et al., 2010;

consideration process on suspension rates and special education identification rates of African American students?	identification and placement in more restrictive instructional programs in order to get needed resources.					Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Harry & Klinger, 2014; Obi & Obiakor, 2001; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Townsend, Thomas, Witty & Lee, 1996
	School teams respond to behavior using interventions such as positive behavioral supports, finding the function of the behavior through assessment and implementing a behavior plan, teaching social skills, using restorative practices, asking staff outside of the school for support, and finally referring the student to special education after these practices were exhausted.	✓	✓	✓		✓ e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bean 2013; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Harris-Murray, King & Rostenberg, 2006; Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; Lo and Cartledge, 2006; Lo, Loe, & Cartledge, 2002; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, et al., 2008; McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2018; Restorative Justice Colorado, 2015; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010; Vincent & Tobin, 2011
	The suspension consideration process significantly decreased suspension rates, but the rate of those suspended who were special education or identified into special education did not decline.				✓	✓ e.g., Artilies & Trent, 1994; Bean, 2013; Blanchett, 2006; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Harry and Anderson, 1994; Harry & Klinger, 2014; Obi & Obiakor, 2001; Skiba et al., 2008; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017; Sullivan, 2017; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017
	Although the suspension rates significantly declined, African American early elementary students are being suspended disproportionately.	✓			✓	✓ e.g., Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Bean, 2013; Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Fergus, 2017; Gregory, Lombardo & Turner, 2018; Skiba et al., 2005; Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017