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School Leaders and Exclusionary Practices: A Study of Discretionary DAEP Placements for Minority Special Education Students

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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Dedication

The process of writing a dissertation affects the people closest to you as they sacrifice time away from you. I want to dedicate this dissertation to my husband and my children. Jason, Abigail, Cason, and Serenity Weiss supported me every step of the way. The countless hours away from home were felt by all of them. I want them to know that I appreciate their sacrifice. I could not have accomplished this goal without them and their loving support.

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The time invested by so many people made this dream a reality. My family, coworkers, and professors all supported me in this journey. My family sacrificed time with me daily to invest in my goals and dreams.

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Abstract

This study addressed the perceptions of assistant principals, counselors, and school-district-level administrators about the overrepresentation of minority special education students in district alternative education placements. The purpose of this study was to examine the discipline practices at three middle school campuses in one 6A urban school district to understand minority special education students' overrepresentation in discretionary district alternative education placements. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with assistant principals, counselors, one dean of students, one assistant superintendent, and one special education director. A document analysis and a data review were conducted to triangulate the results. The findings indicated that years of experience, training, parent involvement, and understanding the function of behavior all impacted discipline decisions for minority special education students. Additional findings uncovered that school documents and training offered by the school district affected how administrators and counselors responded to behavior. I concluded that the counselors, assistant principals, and district-level personnel who participated in the study understood the need to engage minority special education students and their parents in the school. Building an inclusive school environment that engages all stakeholders takes an intentional plan of action.

Keywords: special education, inclusive school environments, overrepresentation, district alternative education placements

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In U.S. K–12 public schools, processes and procedures are imperative for maintaining a safe environment for all students. As a result, these public schools use systematic methods to address behavior and maintain order; these processes are referred to as discipline policies or procedures and consist of a range of approaches and consequences that are in place to correct or address student misbehavior (Black, 2016). School discipline has been at the forefront of reform in the United States. Researchers and advocates have worked to find alternatives to punitive discipline in public schools (Black, 2016). Improving school discipline has focused on finding options for punitive and exclusionary discipline practices in public schools in the United States (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2018). As of 2015, 22 states and the District of Columbia had revised state laws and policies to promote supportive discipline practices that focus on intervention (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2018).

A disproportionate number of minority students are negatively affected by exclusionary discipline practices. For example, the use of suspensions and expulsions in public schools is isolating and exclusionary for minority and special education student populations (Weggman & Smith, 2019). In addition, students served by special education are twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities (Gowdey, 2015; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Students enrolled in schools with a population of 75%–100% Black students are significantly more at risk of being issued a suspension or expulsion when compared to students enrolled in schools with a student population that is less than 25% Black students (Edwards, 2016). These data demonstrate that racial composition directly correlates to the percentage of suspensions and expulsions in public schools.

The evolution of school discipline and expectations for inclusive school environments in Texas has not been enough to close the gaps for minority and special education students. The statewide discipline data show that students of color and students with disabilities continue to be overrepresented in suspensions and expulsions. In 2014–2015 Black students represented 13% of the student population in Texas public schools but accounted for 35% of the out-of-school suspensions (Johnson, 2016). A Texas public school attrition study in 2016 showed that Black and Hispanic students were twice as likely to drop out before graduation compared to White students (Johnson, 2016). Johnson (2016) attributed zero tolerance discipline policies to the increase in dropout rates for minority students in Texas. Texas's dropout rates and suspension rates demonstrate a need for change in school discipline policy for minority student populations. The research presented in this paper addresses the racial inequalities found in school discipline practices and the leadership practices that support inclusive environments.

Background

Racial disparities in discipline data continue to be a problem in public schools in the United States and Texas despite reform. According to a national study, 1 in 5 Black students was suspended, compared to 1 in 10 White students and Asian students in the United States in 2003 (Kewel-Ramani et al., 2007). The disparities in the suspension rates have a significant impact on the educational outcomes for Black students. Students of color experience an increase in academic gaps and school dropout rates when they experience harsh discipline practices (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). The study of race concerning this phenomenon is necessary to understand the contributing factors. School systems often blame the disparities on parent disengagement, a lack of resources, or apathetic student attitudes. Wadhwa (2010) stated that this view is narrow and dismisses the race issue that has been present in school discipline for decades.

The deep roots of racism in America and the widening disparities found in discipline data for students of color represent a need for change. Race in school discipline disparities has a historical foundation that predates segregation (Carter et al., 2017). The history of the United States plays a crucial role in the continual stereotyping of students of color (Carter et al., 2017). Whites have an account of superiority that is still affecting students of color in the 21st century. Fiel (2015) discovered that after desegregation with the deregulation of schools, schools began to compete again and segregate. The new direction of education with charter schools, choice, and divided districts is causing an even greater racial divide in education (Fiel, 2015).

The change that is needed will take support from government agencies and local practitioners in schools. Support from governmental agencies and systematic change require understanding the problem and a desire to find appropriate solutions. The courts continue to support school administrators and school decisions related to discipline if there is reasonable evidence to support the decision (George, 2015). The Fourteenth Amendment has a due process clause meant to provide safeguards, but schools get by with minimal due process procedures regarding school discipline (George, 2015). The change in school discipline is hindered by balancing local control of school discipline with national policies. Therefore, the shift in school discipline must occur at the local level and the national level.

Educational leaders can support the fundamental changes in school systems needed to break the cycle of school discipline disparities (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). The National Policy Board for Educational Administration outlined culturally responsive practices in its standards. Standard 3 states that educational leaders are responsible for creating culturally responsive practices for all students (Minkos et al., 2017). Minority students and students in

poverty are overrepresented in suspensions and alternative education placements, leading to negative feelings about school across the United States (Bottiani et al., 2017). Alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices and school leaders' consciousness of the bias are necessary to break the cycle of disproportionate discipline placements for minority special education students.

An evaluation of the factors involved in disciplinary decisions will support schools with identifying the area of bias and guide the examination of leadership moves that support inclusive discipline practices. According to Emmons and Belangee (2018), teachers and administrators who are aware of their lifestyle and how it affects their view of behavior can better monitor their perception of disruptive behavior. Racial disparities continue despite years of research because race is challenging for public school officials to discuss (Carter et al., 2017). Race is challenging for school officials due to the pervasive White cultural norms found in public schools (Simson, 2014). Institutions in the United States often operate in a race-neutral space formulated around White social norms (Simson, 2014). Therefore, school officials are blind to the race factor involved in the school system and the discipline decision-making process. Acknowledging racism is a central factor in providing equity in education and crucially examining all the elements that surround marginalization (DeMatthews, 2016).

Exclusionary discipline policies adversely affect students throughout their school career and negatively impact public schools' overall effectiveness. Schools have only a few options that can be utilized as consequences for misbehavior. Most of the alternatives involve some level of exclusion from the school classroom or regular school environment. The most restricted consequence students can receive in Texas is placement in a district alternative education program (DAEP). DAEPs are designed to support students who have been removed

from their assigned school (Texas Education Code, 2019). The pressure on schools and the lack of options have created a system that regularly punishes students harshly for minor incidents (Simson, 2014). The nature of exclusion is problematic and creates a cycle of failure for the most at-risk students. The loss of instructional time has negative consequences that hinder future success; the data show that schools with high suspension rates have lower school climate ratings, academic measures, and higher dropout rates (Simson, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Public school leaders are essential in changing disciplinary culture in schools and ensuring that policies do not target minority groups. Minority groups historically have a disproportionate number of discipline suspensions and expulsions compared to their White counterparts (Carter et al., 2017; George, 2015; Triplett et al., 2014). Implicit and explicit biases exist in school discipline practices because of the lack of oversight in school disciplinary decisions (George, 2015). Differences between minority students and White students' suspension and expulsion rates are a national problem that affects schools at all levels (Triplett et al., 2014). The specific problem addressed in this study was the difference in suspension and expulsion rates at an urban school district in central Texas.

Public schools in Texas are facing the same dilemma of higher exclusionary discipline placements that involve minority students. According to Tajalli and Garba (2014), Black students represented 72.4% of all DAEP placements, and Hispanic students represent 57.4% of Texas DAEP placements. Minority students in Texas are affected by "the whiteness" of the education system, and the disproportionate discretionary DAEP placements serve as evidence (Tajalli & Garba, 2014). A study conducted in Texas examined middle school DAEP placements and showed that Black students in Grades 6 through 8 represented about 14% of the population but

received 4%–7% of the DAEP placements per grade level (Hilbreth & Slate, 2014). The same study showed that their White classmates represented about 35% of the student population but received 1%–2% of the DAEP placements per grade level (Hilbreth & Slate, 2014).

The 6A urban school district in central Texas investigated in this study was marked as needing improvement by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for disproportionate percentages of out-of-school suspensions (OSSs) and DAEP placements for minority special education students. A designation of "in need of improvement" by TEA in this area meant that the urban 6A school district in central Texas was above the state average in OSS and DAEP placements for minority special education students, demonstrating statistical significance. The disproportionality threshold for out-of-placement disciplinary decisions set by the Texas Education Agency for all public school districts in Texas was a risk ratio of 2.5 cut points. The 6A urban school district in central Texas had a disproportionality ratio of 13.3 cut points for Black students served by special education. The data explicitly indicated an overrepresentation of Black special education students assigned to OSS or DAEP that took them out of their regular school environment and was out of placement.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study used the critical race theory as a theoretical framework to investigate the disparities found in discipline data for minority special education students in central Texas. The qualitative case study addressed the discipline practices at three middle school campuses in a 6A urban central Texas independent school district to understand minority special education students' overrepresentation in discretionary district alternative education placements. The study involved middle school assistant principals, middle school counselors, and critical district leaders engaged in the student discipline process.

This study focused on one 6A urban school district in central Texas. The 6A urban school district is a public school system that served 8,500 students in pre-K through 12th grades. The school district is located in Texas's heart and is an urban area that serves a student population that is 76% low income. The school district's demographics were 26% Black, 41% Hispanic, 26% White, and 2% Asian. The school district had a disproportionate percentage of DAEP placements for Black students served by special education; its risk ratio of 13.3 was significantly above the disproportionality risk ratio of 2.5 set by TEA. The subpopulation most affected by the disproportionate discipline ratio was Black students served by special education.

Research Questions

RQ1: What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups?

RQ2: What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students?

Definition of Key Terms

District alternative education program. The Texas Education Agency allows school districts the autonomy to manage school discipline using the guidance of the Texas Education Code. In 1995 the Texas Safe Schools Act required all public schools in Texas to establish a disciplinary alternative education placement (Texas Education Agency, 2007). The Texas Education Code Chapter 37 defined a DAEP placement as a placement somewhere other than the student's regular classroom setting (Texas Education Agency, 2007). To prevent students from missing school due to expulsions and suspensions, school districts in Texas have created district

alternative education placements (Tajalli & Garba, 2014).

Explicit bias. Racial bias exists at many different levels and is classified as implicit or explicit bias. Explicit bias is a conscious decision and is challenging to measure (Gibson et al., 2017). People are aware of the bias and have some control over how they express their preferences. Research indicates that children and young adults tend to identify strongly with their in-group concerning explicit bias (Gibson et al., 2017).

Implicit bias. Students are exposed to many adults throughout their school careers, and each adult brings life experiences to how they approach students. Implicit bias is discriminatory biases that are subconscious (Cook et al., 2018). Gibson et al. (2017) discovered that children and young adults strongly identify with their in-group on implicit bias measures. The bias is not intentional but can cause a person to operate contradictory to their own beliefs (Cook et al., 2018). Greenwald and Krieger (2006) defined implicit bias as "discriminatory biases based on implicit attitudes or implicit stereotypes" (p. 951). Implicit bias can change over time, and research has indicated that implicit bias becomes more vital as children get older and become young adults (Gibson et al., 2017).

In-school suspension (ISS). Public schools issue consequences for student misbehavior, and one consequence used in Texas is an in-school suspension. School districts in Texas utilize in-school suspension as a consequence for students who choose not to follow the local student code of conduct. "In-school suspension" is a term that describes student suspension from regularly scheduled classes, and the suspension is served at the school in a designated supervised space. In most school districts in Texas, local policies guide the use of in-school suspensions, but administrators have the authority to issue the consequences.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The U.S. government passed legislation in 1970 outlining a right to a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities, known as the Individual With Disabilities Act (Reynolds et al., 2013). IDEA outlines and defines individuals with disabilities who are protected under the law. The purpose of the law is to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities and their parents (IDEA, Title 20, Subchapter 2). The legislation was updated in 2004 and is known as the Individuals With Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 (Reynolds et al., 2013).

Out-of-school suspension (OSS). The term "out-of-school suspension" is used to describe a consequence given to students in which they are temporarily removed from the school campus. Students issued out-of-school suspension are expected not to attend school for a designated number of days, not to exceed 3 days. The Texas Education Code Chapter 37 outlines the specific details of out-of-school suspensions. School districts should not issue OSS for more than 3 days, and for students below third grade, it is only allowed for violent misbehaviors that caused bodily injury.

Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS). The Texas Education Agency reviews school districts in Texas through accountability systems. The PBMAS is used to analyze specific program data for school districts. The individual programs evaluated with this system are bilingual education/English as a second language, career and technical education, specific federal title programs, and special education.

School-to-prison pipeline. In recent years, politicians and school officials have begun to use the term "school-to-prison pipeline." According to McGrew (2016), the school-to-prison pipeline is a metaphor for the correlation between school discipline records and incarceration rates. The term is used specifically to address the disproportionate rate at which students of color

are disciplined in the United States compared to their White counterparts (McGrew, 2016). Characteristics of the school-to-prison pipeline are consequences that remove students from the school environment, criminalizing behavior in schools, and student involvement in the criminal justice system (Ruiz, 2017)

Student code of conduct. School districts in Texas are governed by a board of trustees known as the school board. each year the school board in each independent school district in Texas adopts a student code of conduct that outlines student expectations for behavior, academic guidelines, and attendance policies (Texas Education Agency, 2007). The student code of conduct serves as a guide for behavior and academic expectations for parents, students, and staff. Texas school administrators use the student code of conduct to make discipline decisions for students.

Texas Education Agency (TEA). School districts in Texas have a governing agency run by the State of Texas. The agency that governs school districts in Texas is the Texas Education Agency. The TEA is responsible for establishing the education code and the administrative code and oversees school accountability (Texas Education Code, 2019). The Texas Education Agency is led by the commissioner of education in Texas, Mike Morath. TEA oversees all 1,227 public school districts in Texas.

Zero tolerance. The term "zero tolerance" describes mandatory school discipline policies in the United States. Zero tolerance policies became prevalent in the 1990s when increased violence in schools and school shootings started to occur more frequently (Ruiz, 2017). School discipline policies associated with the term "zero tolerance" mandate specific consequences for students based on their misbehavior (Ruiz, 2017). The Gun Free Zone Act of 1994 is an example of one of the first zero tolerance policies; it required schools to expel

students in possession of a firearm on school property for 1 year (Ruiz, 2017). School districts across the nation continued to use zero tolerance policies and have expanded the practice to other offenses such as alcohol- and drug-related offenses (Ruiz, 2017). The two significant elements of zero tolerance are that harsh punishments will discourage misconduct and the removal of students with severe behavior will improve the overall school climate (Heilbrun et al.,2015).

Summary

In exclusionary discipline placements, discipline disparities for minority populations are a state and national problem. Texas schools need reform. In 2009–2010, the research indicated that Texas schools suspended 15.4% of Black students, 6.5% of Latino students, and 3.2% of White students. The gap for the Black–White group was 12.3% (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). The problem of disproportionate discipline affects school success and graduation rates. In 2015–2016, in Texas, 102,610 students dropped out of public high schools (Johnson, 2016). The disproportionality continues to be present in public schools; measures taken to alleviate the problem have not successfully changed the exclusionary practices that are failing students of color. Texas has accountability systems that support school districts and identify problematic areas that are statistically disproportionate. Still, Texas lacks systems or processes to support public schools in changing exclusionary discipline practices (Booth et al., 2012).

The demographics of Texas schools are changing with the population increase in the state, and the schools in Texas require systems to support the changing demographics. According to R. Perry and Hawthorne (2018), the "urban triangle" in Texas between Dallas, San Antonio, Houston, and the Rio Grande has experienced growth in most schools. The 6A urban school district studied was located in the middle of the urban triangle and is affected by the growth and fluctuation of the student population. Therefore, the school leaders in the district must

understand the growing community to support their unique and individual needs. This study addressed the perspectives of middle school leaders and district-level leaders on the disproportionate DAEP placements for minority special education students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Public schools in the United States are tasked with educating all students and providing free appropriate public education. Educating the nation's youths is a collective task that requires national, state, and local policy. Despite the oversight, regulation, and intervention, minority students and special educations students remain vulnerable in public schools. School leaders can change the culture of exclusion in public schools for minority and special education students. A study conducted by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies showed that 1 in every 6 Black children enrolled in K–12 schools in the United States had been suspended at least once (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). The suspension rate for Black students was higher than for any other racial group studied. Losen and Gilspie (2012) also discovered that disabled students were suspended at twice the rate of their nondisabled peers. Students with disabilities and students of color are at risk in public schools in the United States when faced with inequitable practices.

The research conducted in this study reviewed school discipline in the United States and how exclusionary practices affect minority special education students. Bell (2016) pointed out that minority discipline disparities and special education overrepresentation have been studied separately. There is a need to consider the overlapping intersection of minority special education students concerning this problem (Bell, 2016). The literature review presented discusses race, special education, discipline placements, school leadership, and the policies that have created disparities in discipline data for minority special education students. The current national and local trends in school discipline policies, school leadership, and the effects of discipline disparities were studied.

The research conducted used search engines through ProQuest, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and the ACU Library. The keywords used in the search included "critical race theory," "minority

students," "school discipline discrepancies," "Texas discipline policy," "school-to-prison pipeline," "United States education policy," "disciplinary alternative education placements," and "exclusionary discipline practices." The literature review addressed topics related to school discipline in the United States and Texas and focused on race, special education, and exclusionary practices.

Review of the Literature

Race in Public Schools

School racial divides have been a part of U.S. public schools for decades and date back to the historic *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* 1954 decision to desegregate schools (Triplett et al., 2014). There continue to be social and racial inequalities in the U.S. public education system, despite public policies geared toward providing equity (Triplett et al., 2014). In recent years, cases of police brutality that have targeted Black males have brought attention to the racial divide that exists in public institutions across the nation (Carter et al., 2017). The divide in schools is not a new phenomenon and has roots that date back to zoning practices that were in place as cities and school districts developed (Carter et al., 2017). The zoning practices have led to a division of schools based on neighborhoods and social status. Physical separation and psychological separation have led to complex boundaries to permeate and make it unlikely that students will learn from each other (Carter et al., 2017). The racial divides affect students of color and create a negative correlation to the school environment.

There are multiple theories on modern-day segregation and the circumstances that have created racially divided school systems. Fiel (2015) used a Weberian perspective based on status group competition for resources as he explored contemporary segregation. The two main issues related to school segregation are race and socioeconomic status (Fiel, 2015). The nature of

competition among schools for limited resources has widened the inequality gaps for minority

students, and the decentralization of schools through school choice also harms minority students

(Fiel, 2015). The competitive nature of schools in the United States is a leading factor that

contributes to racially and economically divided schools.

Students of color recognize race as a factor in public schools that creates a negative space

that affects behavior and academic success. The nature of racism is complicated, but it can be as

simple as a harmful physical correlation and stereotype. A study conducted in 2004 showed that

Black faces were more likely to be associated with criminal activity than White faces (Eberhardt

et al., 2004). Edwards (2016) found that when the school population consisted of more than 50%

of Black students, behaviors are more likely to result in a suspension. Her study also

substantiated that homogeneous schools, majority White or majority Black, create an

environment where Black students are more likely to be suspended for misbehavior. The

evidence presented in the Edwards (2016) study demonstrated that institutional inconsistencies

surround discipline in schools can create inequality. Consistent evidence shows disproportionate

punishment for minority students is not a coincidence and the investigation of race as a factor is

warranted (Simson, 2014).

Racial divides have led to disparities in school practices, specifically in school discipline

decisions. The Black–White discipline gap was documented for the first time in 1975 by the

Children's Defense Fund (Young et al., 2018). The zero tolerance discipline policies of the last

decade have caused a greater divide in schools. The Obama administration made a call in 2014 to

end the policies that are negatively affecting minorities (Triplett et al., 2014). Students of color

often are aware of racial bias patterns, which create a negative feeling about school (Bottiani et

al., 2016). Students see schools with racial discrepancies in their discipline data as unfair and not

inclusive (Bottiani et al., 2016). School discipline decisions vary from school to school due to school administrators' discretion in the decision-making process.

The factors that lead to inconsistencies in discipline practices in public schools consist of implicit and explicit biases. When race is identified as a social construct, aspects and stereotypes that affect students of color are brought to the forefront (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Simson, 2014). For instance, Huang and Cornell (2017) found that Black students have a higher rate of aggressive attitudes than White students. These data indicate that racial differences impact discipline decisions. The lack of understanding of White middle-class teachers and administrators affects how they react to students of color and is an implicit bias (Carter et al., 2017; George, 2015). The stereotypes of the angry Black female and the dangerous Black male feed into how students are disciplined in schools (Carter et al., 2017; George, 2015). Recent studies support these findings and indicate that schools with larger Black populations often assign harsher consequences (Bekkerman & Gilpin, 2015). The school administrator often does not recognize the bias because they are not aware of their perceptions of race.

Public schools in the United States were developed to support a democratic society dominated by Whites, and the norms of school systems today are still governed by White social norms (Simson, 2014). The behavioral standards in public schools expect students of color to adapt to the White norms, and failure to adapt can lead to a student being labeled as defiant (Simson, 2014). The vague understanding of social norms causes defiant behaviors from African American students to be viewed as more violent and dangerous and treated with harsher punishments (Simson, 2014). These norms are an example of an implicit bias that

creates negative space for students of color and has created racial disproportion in school

discipline data.

The variation in discipline decisions among schools leads to gaps in the discipline data

that negatively impact how students of color perceive the school environment. Students of color

report adjustment problems and a feeling of a lack of equity in schools that have a statistically

significant Black–White gap in the suspension rate (Bottiani et al., 2016). There is overwhelming

evidence that racial disparities exist in discipline data in public schools in the United States and

have negative consequences that can last into adulthood (Young et al., 2018). When students of

color negatively perceive the school environment and feel isolated, they do not attach to the

school environment. A lack of attachment to the school environment contributes to increased

school dropout rates and supports the school-to-prison analogy.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The Department of Justice and the Department of Education have partnered together to

tackle the school-to-prison problem across the nation (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). The study of the

phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline is necessary to understand the contributing factors

to the school discipline disparities. School discipline has been at the forefront of school reform

since the early 1980s in the United States, and the school discipline approach that has been

prevalent is zero tolerance. Zero tolerance policies were developed in response to an increase in

school violence and school shootings (Edwards, 2016). The zero tolerance policies in public

schools have led to the rise in the prison population in the United States from 1987 to 2001, the

prison population tripled (Gonzalez, 2012). The school-to-prison pipeline metaphor has been

used for decades to describe the connection between educational discipline policies and the

judicial system; the term "pipeline" dates back to the 1960s (McGrew, 2016). However, the term

has gained more attention in the last few years and has been used by the U.S. Department of Education as a platform for school discipline reform (McGrew, 2016). The need for school discipline reform currently is centered on race and the disproportionate number of minority students affected by the zero tolerance policies in schools.

Zero tolerance policies at an early age set the tone of exclusion for minority student populations, leading to the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline has gained strength in recent years with a strong correlation between school dropout rates and incarceration rates (Cramer et al., 2014; Simson, 2014). The student populations affected the most by zero tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline are minority students in low-income school zones (Cramer et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2018). This phenomenon can start as early as elementary school with a lack of school involvement, wait-to-fail policies, and a focus on punishment instead of correcting misbehavior (Cramer et al., 2014). In an autoethnography, Jones et al. (2018) discovered that each inmate they interviewed had experienced exclusionary discipline in elementary school at an early age.

The following excerpt is a narrative from Jones et al. (2018):

"Excuse me, ma'am; we're expelling your son. Could someone translate to Mrs. Ramirez that Christian is being expelled for stealing?" The school, Adams Elementary, expelled me in the middle of fourth grade. Because this expulsion occurred at so early an age, it established me as a "troublemaker" in all schools I attended, but worse than the label was the zero-tolerance policies I was subjected to for the smallest infractions. These policies created inconsistency in school settings and caused me to feel excluded from school. I never attended one school for more than two years. I was kicked out of three elementary

schools and two middle schools. After attending two high schools, for one day each, I

dropped out of high school. At 15, I was arrested; at 16, I learned to read. (p. 54)

The research indicates that suspension rates are directly related to principals' views on zero tolerance; principals that support zero tolerance have higher suspension rates (Heilbrun et al., 2015). Minority students are likely to fall into each of these pitfalls of the educational system because it is designed to cater to White middle-class students (Cramer et al., 2014). The correlation between school discipline, academic achievement, and the incarceration of youth in the United States is alarming.

The research indicates that the school-to-prison pipeline is not random and overtly affects students with mental illness, students in poverty, and students of color (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). Emmons and Belangee (2018) analyzed Alderian psychology concepts and made a correlation between students' lifestyles, social acceptance, feelings of inferiority, and behavior at school. They found that when teachers and administrators respond to students' emotional outbursts with punishment continually at the elementary level, it can be the beginning of a cycle that leads to more significant consequences in the future (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). Children who experience unpredictable environments cannot cope emotionally at school and need support from teachers and administrators (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). Recognizing risk factors, providing early interventions, and changing how school personnel approach and respond to school behavior will benefit students in minority groups (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). There are multiple factors in school exclusionary practices that have formed the school-to-prison pipeline analogy. Simson (2014) explained that two main factors are the increasing criminalization of schools and the push-out phenomenon created by zero tolerance policies and high-stakes testing.

The school-to-prison pipeline research supports a statistically reliable connection between exclusionary discipline in public schools and incarceration. Multiple variables lead to the school-to-prison pipeline reported in Novak's (2018) literature research. Novak (2018) identified the following factors: race, sex, English language learner status, special education status, school discipline, grade retention, and socioeconomic status. The result is that despite these variables, there is a significant relationship between exclusionary discipline and the juvenile justice system. The nature of school discipline is affected by many variables, which translates to the school-to-prison pipeline. There are six effects of the school-to-prison pipeline outlined in McCarter (2017):

1. The majority of school discipline is discretionary.

2. Consequences do not fit the offenses and are not levied impartially.

3. School discipline is disproportionally applied to minority students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students.

4. Suspension rates vary and are affected by school climate.

5. Suspension and expulsions harm students and schools.

6. Exclusionary discipline increases a student's chances of being involved in the justice system. (pp. 56–57)

Exclusionary Practices in Public Schools

The factors that lead to behavior problems in schools are multifaceted, and schools need multiple approaches to support students with behavior other than suspension and expulsion. McElderry and Cheng (2014) examined race gender, social, economic status, family structure, parent involvement, special needs, and school structure in their study of school discipline gaps. The results indicate that exclusionary discipline practices affect male, low socioeconomic

status (SES), minority, special education students the most; they had the highest expulsion rate and suspension (McElderry & Cheng, 2014). In the 1970s, Black students were twice as likely to be suspended as their White counterparts; in 2011, Black students were three times as likely to be suspended (Edwards, 2016). The overreliance on exclusionary practices by schools hurts students of color.

Suspensions and expulsions are overused in schools and create an unfavorable environment for students. The rise of suspensions in schools is significant; in 1974, an estimated 1.7 million students were suspended from school, and in 2006, an estimated 3.3 million students were suspended from school (Simson, 2014). African American students in middle and high schools have close to a 1-in-4 chance of being suspended or expelled (Black, 2016). After years of research, punitive consequences do not solve behavior issues and lower student academic achievement (Black, 2016). The demographic composition of schools can make a difference for students of color. Edwards (2016) discovered that homogeneous schools create an environment where Black students are more likely to be punished. Schools that are racially mixed create an environment where Black students are less likely to be punished. The gaps found in discipline data for students of color result from educational systems, policies, and practices rooted in racism (DeMatthews, 2016; Simson, 2014).

Exclusionary practices in public schools are utilized to control and punish students for misbehavior, and it has not been successful at changing behavior. Maryland and Connecticut are ahead of the curve in changing this norm. In 2010, Connecticut passed legislation to make out-of-school suspension a last resort (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). In 2012, Maryland's State Board of Education passed a policy to regulate suspensions and called for schools to develop "rehabilitative philosophies" and focus on positive behavior intervention (Losen & Gillespie,

2012). There are alternatives to suspension and expulsion that are not used enough in public schools. Policy change at the state level is a step in the right direction for changing exclusionary practices in public schools.

National School Discipline Reform

The right to an education is changing in the United States and is transitioning from being a statutory right to a constitutional right (Black, 2016). Education in the United States as a legal right means that suspensions from schools are no longer a local problem but a violation of a constitutional right (Black, 2016). The state courts have taken several different approaches to education as a constitutional right. For the most part, state courts have maintained that they must provide access to school in a safe environment, and student misbehavior can forfeit that right (Black, 2016). In a recent case, *King ex rel. Harvey-Barrow v. Beaufort County Board of Education* set the precedence that there is a constitutional right to know why a student was excluded from an alternative education placement (Black, 2016). The varied responses indicate some debate on the right to an education in the United States.

Government institutions in the United States have differing opinions on school discipline jurisdiction and how to hold schools accountable for the racial disparities found in the data. A recent approach by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) was to analyze data and pinpoint schools with racial discipline disparities and take action against the schools identified (Heriot & Somin, 2018). This approach's outcome has not been favorable for schools and often has created chaos in schools and teacher resentment (Heriot & Somin, 2018). In January of 2017, the OCR website had over 300 open investigations against school districts for racial disparities in the discipline (Heriot & Somin, 2018).

School systems are hypersensitive to policy changes, and school accountability policies have impacted discipline in public schools. The pressures of high-stakes testing and accountability have emerged since the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 has created a push-out effect in public schools across the United States (Simson, 2014). Federal dollars are allocated based on student test scores; it is no longer in an educator's best interest to treat misbehavior as a need for redirection or teaching (Simson, 2014). The current policy on education is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ESSA was passed in 2015. Its two primary goals are preparing students using the college and career readiness standards and supporting more inclusive environments for students in poverty, students of color, and students with disabilities (Young et al., 2017). Educators' high demands to increase test scores and a lack of funding in education have created an unfavorable environment for teachers and students.

Texas School Discipline Policy

School discipline policies in Texas are designed around the regulations put in place by TEA. The local school boards in Texas at each independent school district develop local plans and have some local control over school discipline policies. The state-level policy that outlines Texas school discipline is the Texas Education Code Chapter 37 on safe schools (Texas Education Code, 2019). According to Booth et al. (2012), Texas is an excellent place to study discipline because 1 in every 5 students in the United States is educated in Texas. The local control and the state policy guidelines create consistent expectations across the state but allow for some variation at the local district level.

The policies and regulations established in Texas for public schools are essential guides that provide a legal framework for school districts. Still, school leaders have a lot of influence

on discipline decisions. The individual choices that administrators make each day affect exclusionary discipline rates at every school in Texas. The variation in suspension rates demonstrates that respective campuses within districts in Texas choose to discipline students at different levels of severity (Booth et al., 2012). There are two types of exclusionary discipline classifications in Texas mandatory and discretionary; the research indicates that 92% of removals are discretionary (Booth et al., 2012).

Discipline Alternative Education Placements

Discipline alternative educational arrangements are long-term placements for students used as an alternative to expulsion from the school environment. The federal Gun-Free School Act of 1994 established the need for alternative disciplinary programs in public schools across the United States, and Texas followed suit in 1995 (Texas Education Agency, 2007). In 1995, the Texas Safe Schools Act was adopted and required all Texas public schools to have a disciplinary alternative education program (Texas Education Agency, 2007). School districts utilize DAEP placements as a tool to support school environments with severe violations and behavior without expelling students from the school environment.

The use of DAEP placements has changed since the original formation, and local school districts have more control over discretionary placements. DAEP placements were initially utilized for students that violated local and state-mandated student codes of conduct with a severe violation such as drug possession, bringing a gun to school, or committing violent physical attacks on others. In recent years policies have changed; a student can be assigned DAEP for persistent disruption of the learning environment (Texas Education Agency, 2007). The DAEP placements are either mandatory or discretionary. A mandatory placement is a direct violation of the student code of conduct that involves the use of drugs or alcohol, possession of

a firearm, assault, or Class A felony charges (Texas Education Agency, 2007). The campus

principal assigns discretionary placements for persistent violation of the student code of

conduct or persistent disruption of the school environment (Texas Education Agency, 2007).

Special Education Students

Education in the United States is a constitutional right and is mandated by individual

states. The age groups vary by state for public education, but all states must provide free public

schools for children generally ranging in age from 5 years of age to 18 years of age. Students

with disabilities did not have guaranteed educational rights until 1975, when the U.S. Congress

passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The act has since been renamed the

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA; Reynolds et al., 2013). IDEA was the first legislative

response to support individuals with disabilities in the United States. The latest reform in this

policy is known as IDEIA 2004 or the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004

(Reynolds et al., 2013). The educational mandates in these policies are put in place to protect

students with disabilities in the United States.

Students served in public schools under special education are at a high risk of being

subjected to exclusionary discipline practices. The research indicates that being identified as a

student with a disability puts students at a higher risk of expulsion or suspension (Booker &

Mitchell, 2011; Gowdey, 2015). The educational policies and mandates that exist to protect

special education students in the United States have failed to protect them from exclusionary

practices and support their future success (Bell, 2016).

Minority students are overidentified as needing special education services in public

schools under IDEA regulations (Zhang et al., 2014). Zhang et al. (2014) studied trends of

special education identification from 2004 to 2008 and found that African Americans

represented 14.79%–15.45% of students identified; American Indians, 14.10%–15.21%;

Whites, less than 13%; and Asian/Pacific Islanders, 5.73%–6.11% of students identified. The

rates were consistent with the studies conducted 10 years prior and demonstrate the lack of

attention given to the overidentification of minority students in special education (Zhang et al.,

2014).

The overidentification of African American students receiving special education

services negatively affects the school experience for students of color and increases their

chances for exclusionary discipline. A national study in 2012 showed that African American

students with disabilities represented 25 percent of suspensions compared to the average for all

groups at 13% (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Losen and Gillespie (2012) discovered that in the

100 largest districts in the United States, the highest discipline rates occurred for African

American male students. There were also high discipline rates for African American and

Hispanic girls with disabilities (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

Special Education in Texas

Texas supports public education and generally has a positive public school system, but

special education in Texas public schools has been under fire. The State of Texas is required to

serve students with disabilities in public schools and to follow the regulations established by the

U.S. government under the IDEA legislation regarding students with disabilities (Michals, 2018).

In 2004 new accountability guidelines established by the Texas Education Agency limited school

districts to identifying 8.5% of the student population for special education services

(DeMatthews & Knight, 2019; Michals, 2018). The rate of special education identification

dropped from 11.7% in 2004 to 8.5% in 2015 (DeMatthews & Knight, 2019; Michals, 2018).

Historically, Texas has struggled with correctly identifying students of color and English language learners for special education. Before the 2004 legislation in Texas, 14% of Black students in Texas were identified as needing special education services compared to the overall rate of 12% for all student populations (Michals, 2018). English language learners represented 11% of the special education population before the 2004 accountability changes and only 7.5% after 2014 (Michals, 2018). The data demonstrate that Texas has overidentified African American students and underserved English language learners through special education services.

Public schools in Texas are affected by TEA mandate regulations and the accountability systems that rate the public schools. The reversal of the 2004 TEA mandates by the U.S. Department of Education has put an unprecedented demand on Texas public schools; since the reversal in 2016, an additional 14,000 students were identified as needing special education services (Michals, 2018). Students in Texas who are identified as in need of special education require specialized funding and services. The State of Texas has struggled with funding education and special education for years, and funding took a drastic hit in the 2008 recession (Michals, 2018). The most recent Texas 85th Legislative Session did not respond to special education funding (Michals, 2018). Public schools in Texas are struggling to find funding to support the growing needs of special education students.

Educational Impact of Exclusionary Practices

The educational impact of exclusionary discipline practices creates a cycle of failure for at-risk students. This type of school failure leaves students disconnected from the school environment and promotes feelings of alienation (B. Perry & Morris, 2014). Huang and Cornell (2018) found that academic ability, gender, and disability status all significantly

impacted the percentage of student suspensions. Students in at-risk categories excluded from the regular school environment have been shown to have lower grade point averages by 0.35 points compared to students who are not excluded for discipline consequences (Cholewa et al., 2018). B. Perry and Morris (2014) found that suspensions were associated with a lack of reading progress and lower math achievement levels. The number one factor contributing to school dropout rates is suspensions (Johnson, 2016). Exclusionary discipline practices harm academic achievement and leave students feeling isolated from the school environment.

A lack of academic progress has been associated with the overuse of exclusionary practices in school environments. School environments as a whole, not just suspended students, are affected by an overreliance on exclusionary practices. Students that did not have suspension records were also negatively affected academically by the overuse of suspensions (B. Perry & Morris, 2014). Students have regular classes, friendships, and relationships with students who are suspended, and the disruption of the environment when students are removed affects all students (B. Perry & Morris, 2014). Nonsuspended students are likely to feel high anxiety levels in punitive schools, which lead to lower academic success (B. Perry & Morris, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

Educational leaders are in a place to support change in public schools, and local public school administrators are crucial to changing school discipline culture for minority special education students. School leaders can utilize the critical race theory and social justice leadership to combat the inequalities in school discipline policies and decisions (DeMatthews, 2016). Also, school leaders need to use their experiences and their stakeholders' experiences to develop new solutions to solve the racial inequalities in the discipline in public schools

(DeMatthews, 2016). The decision-making involved in school discipline requires teachers and school administrators to make judgments about students' misbehavior. Their perceptions play a significant role in the culture of school discipline (Heilbrun et al., 2015).

School Leaders as Change Agents

Principals and administrators are vital players in developing inclusive school cultures and inclusive discipline practices in K–12 public schools in the United States. According to Nash (2011), transformational leadership factors positively affect student achievement and behavior in schools serving low-SES populations and minority groups. The transformational leadership characteristics that made the most significant impact were idealized behavior, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation (Nash, 2011). The transformational leadership theory structures outlined by Graham and Nevarez (2017) are empowerment, critical pedagogy, and social justice. Transformational leaders must inspire others inside and outside the organization (Bottomley et al., 2014). They also identified that influential leaders must also possess the ability to create a vision, uphold standards, and be integrators and developers (Bottomley et al., 2014).

School cultures inclusive for all students are fundamental to changing the disparities found in school discipline systems, and school leaders must lead the work. The research indicates that transformational leadership positively impacts school leaders and raises their level of conduct and aspiration (Woods & Martin, 2016). Transformational leaders create an environment of learning and high expectations for all students (Woods & Martin, 2016). Change is needed in public schools to change the trajectory of the school-to-prison pipeline, and transformational leadership practices have been successful in K–12 public schools. Asencio and Mujkic (2016) discovered that transformational practices built employees' trust in leaders more than

transactional behaviors. Therefore, public agencies and institutions will benefit from leaders that exhibit transformational characteristics (Asencio & Mujkic, 2016).

School leaders can enact change in policy and develop school cultures that are inclusive for all students. Bekkerman and Gilpin (2015) suggested that leaders interested in changing policy look at all the contributing factors affecting the disciplinary practices. Administrators' responses to discipline referrals are often inconsistent and are based on how they perceive student actions (Anyon et al., 2014). Studying the cultures, perceptions, and responses will be necessary to enact change in policy (Anyon et al., 2014; Carter et al., 2015). Schools in Denver, Colorado, have experienced success by developing strategies that include alternatives to exclusionary practices (Anyon et al., 2014). By partnering with community outreach groups and developing more checks and balances for suspension and expulsions, Denver had a 40% reduction in expulsions and suspensions across all backgrounds (Anyon et al., 2014). The policy change did support decreases in overall rates, but the gap between minority suspension rates and those of their White peers did not decrease (Anyon et al., 2014). Policy changes in discipline practices are the first step, but it is not enough. Changes at the classroom level must also decrease the gap between minority students and their White peers.

Public school leaders can make a difference by recognizing that race matters and that change must occur across all settings to provide an inclusive environment. Opening the conversation about race and teaching the staff about race-related issues like microaggressions will benefit leaders (Carter et al., 2015). Simple microaggressions that stem from stereotypes and implicit bias affect students at school when they are made to feel inferior by the actions of others (Carter et al., 2015). The more aware staff members are about race, culture, and students' experiences, the more likely it is that sustainable change will occur (Carter et al., 2015). School

leaders recognizing that race matters in schools is a crucial step to mitigating the effects of implicit and explicit bias and changing the culture of school discipline (Carter et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

The critical race theory was developed to research race-related issues and is an appropriate lens for this research project. According to Simson (2014), one of the critical elements in the CRT is that race is not a natural occurrence but is a social construct. In the United States, the social construct of race comprises many different elements, and people associate culture, clothing, religion, education, and so on with a person's race (Simson, 2014). The public education system in the United States has a history of racial divides that have affected equitable access to education for people of color for decades.

The use of critical race theory in educational research supports the notion that race plays a crucial role in shaping the educational journey of students of color in the United States. The political rhetoric has been calling for changes to address class and race inequity in public education, but the problem continues to grow (Rector-Aranda, 2016). Racial divides in the educational setting increase through school choice and voucher programs that promote exclusion (Rector-Aranda, 2016). Wadhwa (2010) used the CRT to frame his research of race in Denver's educational setting after the themes naturally emerged from community interviews. The CRT brought a critical element to the study and allowed the aspects of race in public schools to be critically examined. The CRT examined cultural and institutional practices that pushed parents of color away from the schools (Wadhwa, 2010). The schools blamed poor parent support and home life on the behaviors occurring at schools, but the community viewed race as a critical factor (Wadhwa, 2010). School leaders must examine the

institutional practices driving away parents of color from schools and creating exclusive environments for students of color.

The race issue associated with school discipline and the disproportionate number of students of color receiving exclusionary consequences presents a need to examine the case through the critical race theory. The CRT recognizes a stigma associated with African Americans and that the school discipline systems in the United States are directly affected by this perception (Simson, 2014). Simson (2014) argued that stereotypes exist today due to the long history of racial prejudice and dominance, which affects what is viewed as acceptable behavior in schools today.

Self-Determination Theory and Special Education

This study used the self-determination theory to analyze student behavior and act as a discovery lens for interpreting the results. Self-determination theorists posit that three innate needs influence social development (Emery & Heath, 2016). The innate needs are autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Emery & Heath, 2016). This theory has been utilized since its inception in 1985 to study topics such as teaching, exercise, online habits, and parenting techniques (Hodge, 2016). The theory is grounded in the idea that people create replacement behaviors to fulfill their needs when basic needs are not met in the three areas (Emery & Heath 2016). The replacement behaviors are often negative behaviors that create a cycle that continues to leave their needs unmet (Emery & Heath, 2016). The study addressed the behavior of students with disabilities and the causes behind the behavior using the self-determination theory.

Students served by special education have documented disabilities that require specialized instruction to have their needs met. The U.S. Department of Education has recognized the specific requirements since the passage of IDEA in the 1970s (Reynolds et al.,

2013). The documented overrepresentation of students with disabilities in discipline data demonstrates a cause for concern (Gowdey, 2015; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Public schools are struggling to meet the needs of students with special needs. The use of the self-determination theory supported the study by examining the needs of students and the motivation behind the behavior.

The self-determination theory explores motivation and the human need to connect even when trauma is present. Students bring trauma to school and their negative feelings exist even in a positive school environment. Schools can lessen disaffection if they are aware of the need to support students who are disconnected with school (Wilding, 2015). The innate needs that are referenced in the theory directly relate to students in a school setting.

Limitations of the Literature Review

The review presented above focuses on disparities found in school discipline data for students in minority groups and the zero tolerance policies that have led to the school-to-prison pipeline. The research indicates that exclusion from school harms all students (Notlemeyer et al., 2015). Notlemeyer et al. (2015) found that suspensions were associated with dropout rates and low academic achievement for all students and urged schools to find alternatives to exclusionary practices. McGrew (2016) warned of the oversimplification of the school-to-prison pipeline thinking and encouraged researchers to review all the elements that affect school discipline for students of color. The research is not detailed and sometimes refers to the school-to-prison pipeline as a metaphor and, at other times, describes it as a phenomenon (McGrew, 2016). The disparities create a significant problem for minority populations; however, the adverse effects of exclusionary discipline are felt by all students that experienced exclusion from the school setting

(McCarter, 2017; Notlemeyer et al., 2015). The disparities found in school discipline data for minority student populations are multifaceted and should not be oversimplified.

The critical race theory is an essential element to consider in transforming the culture of school discipline in the United States. The critical race theory may present an issue due to the lack of consensus from scholars of the CRT regarding a clear definition of race (Leonard, 2012). The CRT requires school leaders to understand and recognize the color-blind practices that have led to racial inequality in schools; not all leaders can do this level of examination (DeMatthews, 2016).

The literature examined for this review focuses on the educational setting and is presented from the pedagogical viewpoint. According to McCarter (2017), a problem with the research in this area is that social services, the justice system, and the educational systems all use different terms for the disparities in the data. The social services system refers to the problem as an overrepresentation, and the justice system refers to it as disproportionate minority contact (McCarter, 2017). Expanding the search to include these terms in the research would allow for a broader view of the phenomenon in other settings.

Summary

The factors that lead to disparities in the discipline data for minority and special education students in public schools vary and need examination. The research indicates that minority students are more likely to be punished in school than their White counterparts (Black, 2016). Special education minority students are at a higher risk. It is imperative to examine race, school policies, and school leaders' perceptions to gain a better understanding of the problem. The zero tolerance policies of the last decade have created the need for disciplinary alternative education placements as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions. The new challenge is now

an overrepresentation of minority and special education students in disciplinary alternative

education placements.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The 6A urban school district in central Texas had a disproportionate number of minority special education students assigned to the district alternative education placement for discretionary offenses in 2018 and 2019. The excessive number of minority special education students at the DAEP led to the school district being marked as needing improvement in 2018–2019 by the Texas Education Agency. TEA evaluates school districts in Texas each year using a comprehensive system called the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS); PBMAS monitors bilingual education, career and technical education, specific federal title programs, and special education (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The school district developed an improvement plan based on the results of the PBMAS in 2018–2019, which indicated a significant disparity in DAEP placements for minority special education students.

Chapter 1 identified the problem as a disproportionate number of minority special education students serving DAEP assignments. The research questions were (a) What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals, middle school counselors, the assistant superintendent of student services, and the director of special education about the DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups? and (b) What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, the assistant superintendent of student services, and the director of special education on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students? The literature related to school discipline practices in Texas was described in Chapter 2. This case study addressed the school discipline practices at three middle school campuses in a central Texas school district through document analysis, archival data review, and interviews of assistant principals, school counselors, and district leaders.

The analysis of the three middle schools in the 6A urban school district in central Texas focused on gaining an insight into the discrepancies in exclusionary discipline placements for minority and special education students and the perception of school leaders about the phenomenon. The middle school level consists of the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students; studying the middle level allows for data analysis across 3 years that can be comparable. A study conducted in 2015–2016 by the U.S. Department of Education found that middle schools have higher incidents of violent crime and bullying (Diliberti et al., 2017). The school leaders were chosen based on their job assignments in the 6A urban school district in central Texas, and the participation was voluntary. The positions that this study included were leadership positions on middle school campuses and at the central administration office. The purpose of this case study was to investigate the discipline practices at three middle school campuses in a 6A urban central Texas independent school district to understand the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of minority special education students in discretionary district alternative education placements.

Design and Method

The methodology for this qualitative research study was the case study approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case studies explore a real-life case through methods such as observations, interviews, and document studies to analyze case themes and descriptions. Case studies are used to research a specific phenomenon within a particular system, and there are multiple approaches to case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). There are three types of case studies that are often used in case study research: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An intrinsic case study focuses on the case itself and is interested in evaluating a specific program or an individual student (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The collective case study focuses on multiple cases to explore the phenomenon or issue studied

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). The instrumental case study method is utilized when the researcher is focused on the issue and selects a case to support the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study research method utilized for this study is an instrumental case study.

This instrumental case study concerned discipline disparities at three middle schools in one 6A urban central Texas public school district. An instrumental case study is appropriate because I selected the issue of racial discrepancies in exclusionary discipline data and chose one site to explore the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Ridder (2017), in an instrumental case study, the case plays a supportive role. The research issue is the primary focus in an instrumental case study (Ridder, 2017). This instrumental case study focused on understanding school leaders' perspectives about the phenomenon of discipline disparities for minority special education students found in one 6A central Texas school district.

This instrumental case study design included face-to-face interviews, a document study, and archival record analysis. The research design aligned with Creswell's definition of a case study and was a clearly defined case within the boundaries of the 6A school district in central Texas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study focused on the multiple variables within the school district associated with discipline disparities for minority special education students. The 6A urban school district in central Texas that I studied was a real-life bounded system, and the research problem was a current issue in the school district.

Population, Setting, and Sample

This instrumental case study examined discipline discrepancies in one 6A urban school district in central Texas. In central Texas, the independent school district was classified as a 6A school district by the Texas Education Agency. The population of the school district was 8,591 total students in kindergarten through 12th grades. The school district was located in an urban

community with a total population of 65,000 residents. The student population that made up the school district was classified by TEA as 74.4% economically disadvantaged, 25.6 noneconomically disadvantaged, 10.8% English learners, and 62.1% at-risk. The demographic population of the district was 27.8% African American, 42.8% Hispanic, 23.5% White, 0.4% American Indian, 1.8% Asian, 0.2% Pacific Islander, and 3.5% two or more races (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

The participants of the study were key school leaders at the middle school level and the district level. The participants were six middle school assistant principals, three middle school counselors, one dean of students, one special education director, and one assistant superintendent of student services. The main focus of this study was to examine the discipline practices at three middle school campuses in a 6A urban central Texas independent school district to understand the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of minority special education students in discretionary district alternative education placements. The middle school assistant principals design positive behavior incentives, manage all school discipline referrals, and decide about DAEP placements. Middle school counselors support students with early behavior intervention, preventative services, and academic progress. The dean of students serves as the discipline liaison at the highest-need middle school campus in the 6A central Texas school district. The role was designed to promote preventative measures that support student behavior. The director of special education coordinates all the programs in the district that support special education students. The assistant superintendent of student services helps campuses with discipline decisions and conducts all of the hearings that place students in DAEP. The sampling for this instrumental case study was purposeful, and participants were selected based on positions held in the school district. The participants were asked to participate by receiving a personal invitation from me in

the form of an email invitation or personal phone call. The participants were selected for participation based on the school leadership position they currently hold in the district or previously held in the school district.

The document and archival data analysis utilized information from the middle school student population of the district, which consists of approximately 2,000 students. The archival record study incorporated the discipline data from 2015 to 2019. The document analysis examined the school district student code of conduct, discipline referral processes per campus, and the district PBMAS committee reports. The student code of conduct outlined the set expectations for student behavior and guided the decisions that assistant principals made regarding discipline. The data analysis described school district exclusionary discipline data reported to TEA from 2015 to 2020. The thorough examination of documents and archival data supported a comprehensive view of school discipline in the 6A urban central Texas school district.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

The reliability of the study was imperative for providing an accurate account of the phenomenon. Transferability was one way to ensure that trustworthiness was maintained in the study (Amankwaa, 2016). A method that was used in the study to demonstrate transferability is a thick description. Amankwaa (2016) explained that thick description helps create a detailed account of the study. Descriptions of each assistant principal and their current role within the school district will help understand their viewpoints on discipline in schools. It was also beneficial to describe each middle school and the demographic differences that exist.

An essential element in the qualitative research study was to establish codes from the collected interviews in a format that allowed for accurate analysis. The interviews were coded

using NVivo coding and values coding (Saldana & Omasta, 2017). The NVivo coding supported the initial stages of coding and utilized the participants' words to classify the data. The NVivo coding assisted me in understanding the depth of the data collected from the interviews. Value coding was the next level of coding that was used to analyze the data. The study was designed to gain insight into the practices of middle school assistant principals, and understanding their values was imperative for interpreting the data. Value coding is used to understand the relationship and interconnectedness of a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldana & Omasta, 2017).

Qualitative case study research utilizes triangulation as a reliability measure (Roberts, 2010). The data collection and analysis consisted of analyzing the information collected from the interviews, document analysis, and archival records. In case study research, the use of multiple sources for data analysis and data collection is based on triangulation (Ridder, 2017). Triangulation is utilized to validate the research by evaluating the problem using serval different approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This instrumental case study utilized interview data, data analysis, and an archival record study to triangulate the data and support reliability.

Limitations

Qualitative research utilizes the researcher as the primary data collector, and limitations are constraints that exist and are not controlled by the researcher (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Limitations found in this case study were related to the participants, the study site, and my insider status as the researcher.

The study took place in one 6A urban school district in central Texas, and this limited the data to that particular school district. The participants were selected based on a purposeful sampling for the interviews, which limited the perspectives on the issue. The barriers that existed

are due to the size of the school district and the limited number of interviews conducted. There were 6 assistant principals at the middle school level in the school district. It would have limited the study if all 6 did not agree to participate. To maintain enough data if an assistant principal did not participate in the study, I included other district personnel. The additional participants were district leaders associated with the issue and middle school counselors.

My insider status as the researcher posed specific risks for the study. It was essential to separate my professional role from that of the researcher. The insider status was beneficial to me in the format of access to the organization, and being an insider provides a vast base of knowledge of the organization. The limitation that existed was that participants were more apprehensive about being utterly transparent.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research supports a holistic research method, and data collection is an essential part of the research process. Case study research uses multiple data sources to analyze a specific problem or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This instrumental case study utilized a data collection comprised of semistructured interviews, a document analysis, and an archival record study. The data collection goal was to understand the perspectives of various school leaders about the discipline discrepancies and decision-making processes related to school discipline. The three sources of data allowed me to view the problem from multiple angles and to gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

Interviews are used in qualitative research to understand the participants' views and opinions related to the subject matter (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The semistructured interviews were the primary source of data for this instrumental case study. The interviews were semistructured and designed to elicit open-ended responses; there was a consistent set of

questions for each participant. The interview structure allowed me to utilize follow-up questions and input from each participant, allowing impromptu data to be collected during the interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in person or through a video web conference. It was imperative to gain the participants' trust to get accurate and genuine data from the interviews, and the face-to-face approach allowed for trust to be built with each participant.

The document analysis concerned documents that the 6A urban central Texas school district utilized to communicate discipline expectations and processes. The reviewed documents included the student code of conduct, student/parent handbook, behavior response to intervention checklist, Tier 2 behavior contract, the teacher input form for functional behavior assessment, student management framework, and the DAEP placement processes. The study of critical documents allowed me to gain insight into current discipline practices and discipline policies in the school district. Creswell and Creswell (2018) supported document analysis in case study research as a valid data collection method. Document collections allowed me to understand participants' language and review the documents participants have utilized to make discipline decisions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The document analysis reviewed the documents and artifacts collected from 2015 to 2020. The time frame ensured that the analyzed documents were used and collected simultaneously with the archival data analyzed for the case study.

The archival record analysis reviewed information related to the research that existed in the State of Texas reporting system and past discipline data records. The data considered were an archival record because the institution collected it for purposes other than research. Creswell and Poth (2018) listed archival records as one of six methods for collecting data in case study research. The records analyzed for this case study were from the school term 2015–2016 to the school term 2019–2020. The 5-year window was a sufficient window to allow me to identify

trends and have comparable student groups. Students attend middle schools for 3 years, in the sixth through eighth grades. Therefore, 5 years of data allowed for stability in the student population represented in the data set and allowed for comparative analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out that a common misconception was that ethical issues only occur at the beginning of the research study, but in reality, ethical issues emerge at different points throughout the research process. The study was designed to maintain ethical guidelines at all times with all participants. The areas of ethical consideration reviewed before the study were the relationship I had with the institution, the approval of the school district to conduct the research, and the power imbalances that were present.

I had an insider status with the school district that impacted the study minimally. The insider status provided me with access to the school district and gave the participants trust since relationships already existed. I ensured that statements in the protocols provided a clear understanding that all information was confidential and would not be shared outside the purpose of the study. It was imperative to establish trust with each participant before the interview and provide each participant with sufficient information regarding the study.

The school district had an approval process for proposed research studies. Approval of the school district was granted before the I conducted the study. The school district superintendent approved the study after a detailed letter of explanation was submitted, and I signed a confidentiality agreement. The school district requested that I share the results of the study with school district officials. They also required that the identification of all individuals and the school district remain anonymous in the study.

The study participants were current employees of the school district for the 2019–2020 school year term. I was also a current employee of the school district for the 2019–2020 school term. I am a middle school principal, and most of the participants of the study were middle school counselors and assistant principals. It was crucial to make it clear that participation was voluntary and not mandatory. The nature of my role in the district established a need to ensure that power imbalances did not occur.

Summary

The instrumental case study addressed discipline practices through interviews, a document analysis, and an archival records analysis. The participants were all current employees of one central Texas school district. The school district received a mark of in need of improvement for an overrepresentation of minority special education students at the DAEP. The qualitative case study utilized codes and triangulation to validate the data collected through the research. The study's goal was to evaluate discipline disparities by analyzing the perspectives of key school leaders to understand the phenomenon of racial disparities in discretionary DAEP placements.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

This qualitative case study used the critical race theory as a theoretical framework to investigate the disparities found in discipline data for minority special education students in central Texas. The case study concerned the discipline practices at three middle school campuses in a 6A urban central Texas independent school district to understand minority special education students' overrepresentation in district alternative education placements. The study involved 12 interviews with middle school assistant principals, middle school counselors, and critical district leaders engaged in the student discipline process. A document analysis supported the research and allowed me to review the processes and procedures the district had in place for discipline and training. The discipline data reports provided information about school discipline rates from 2015 to 2020.

The case study used the following research questions to guide the research.

RQ1: What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups?

RQ2: What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students?

Chapter 4 describes the results of the document analysis, archival data review, and interview research.

Description of the Sample

The case study took place in a 6A urban school district in central Texas with 8,500 students. The school district served a student population that was 76% low income. The school

district's demographics were 26% African American, 41% Hispanic, 26% White, and 2% Asian (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The data collected for the study focused on the middle school population in the school district, which consisted of approximately 2,000 students. The case study concentrated on school leaders that supported discipline decisions for special education students in the school system.

The interviews were face-to-face interviews with 6 assistant principals, 3 school counselors, 1 dean of students, 1 special education director, and 1 assistant superintendent of student services. The interviews were done in an office setting and used a semistructured format. The participants were provided with questions before the interview and were allowed to seek clarification. The participants were all asked the same 10 questions. The variation in questions occurred when I needed clarification about the participants' responses to the questions.

The panel included educators with varying levels of educational experience and cultural differences. The participants consisted of 33% male school leaders and 47% female school leaders. The study participants' demographic breakdown was 20% Hispanic, 13% Black, and 46% White. The years of experience varied with each participant, and each participant had served in multiple roles in education. There were three participants with less than 10 total years of experience in education, three with between 10 and 20 years of experience, and six with more than 20 years of experience.

The document analysis reviewed key district documents that outlined the discipline policies and procedures for the 6A urban school district in central Texas. The documents reviewed were the student code of conduct, the DAEP policies and procedures, the student hearing process, and the discipline referral process.

The archival data review included reports published by the TEA from 2015 to 2020. The information reviewed was the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) and the Results Driven Accountability (RDA). The published reports monitored the school district's performance with special programs and subpopulations.

Summary of the Results

The research questions aimed to find (a) What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups? and (b) What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students?

The research questions explored the problem through the lens of critical school leaders. Themes were identified (see Table 1) after multiple readings of each transcript, and NVivo and value codes were used. The NVivo codes used the words of the participants to develop themes. The NVivo codes were analyzed by value, belief, and attitude. The use of two different codes allowed me to analyze the data in the participants' own words and categorize them with a value. The document analysis used a content analysis approach and organized the data around the two research questions. The discipline data reports supported me with the identification of discipline data trends.

Table 1

Emerging Themes

Research questions	Emerging themes
Research Question 1 What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups?	1. School leaders' years of experience and training have an impact on student discipline decisions. 2. Parent involvement and home life make a difference in student behavior. 3. Behavior serves a purpose and fulfills a need.
Research Question 2 What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students?	1. School leaders are role models for students. 2. Relationships are essential in building an inclusive school environment. 3. Race and economic status affect students' experiences in school.

Interview Data

Research Question 1

The first research question was, What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups? The themes that emerged from the data were school leadership and decision-making are related to years of experience, parent involvement and homelife impact students' behavior at school, and behaviors fulfill needs.

Theme 1: Years of Experience/Training. The participants all referenced experience or a lack of experience when they discussed discipline decisions. The experience level varied for each participant and ranged from 1 year of experience in their current leadership role to 20 years in their current leadership role. The assistant principals had the least amount of experience compared to the counselors and the district administrators. Three of the assistant principals were in their first year of leadership, and three were in their second year of administration. All three new assistant principals did not feel adequately trained in making discipline decisions for special education students.

The dean of students had 12 years of leadership experience and 24 years in education. In his opinion, years of experience were the essential factor that supported his discipline decision-making. The training experiences of a first-year assistant principal are described below:

This past year, not enough—I need more training, I believe. I think it's important always to have that tool belt of things you can pull from because of—as many books as I have on my shelves about behavior and discipline and modification and everything, you know, I think I use maybe 10% of them just because it's, it's harder. Still, the training that I have gone to in the past—either with the region or with people that come in are going somewhere—has been amazing because you get to walk away with actual, tangible tools that you've practiced and used. So that's what I want, but I don't feel like I've had enough in the past year.

The formal training that each participant reported receiving varied depending on their current leadership position. The two district-level administrators mentioned CPI, TBRI, CHAMPS, and Restorative Discipline. CPI training was indicated by three of the six assistant principals but not mentioned by the counselors. Restorative Discipline training was referenced as

training by seven of the 10 counselors and assistant principals. CHAMPS training was not

mentioned by the assistant principals or the counselors when asked about formal training. The

TBRI training was indicated as formal training by four assistant principals but not mentioned by

the counselors. The use of mentors and on-the-job training was identified by four of the 12

participants.

The school district discipline procedures and the Texas Education Agency regulations for

discipline emerged as concerns from the participants. One participant mentioned the school

district discipline framework as training. Two participants reported that they did not receive

training in the district discipline framework. Nine of the 12 participants did not mention the

district discipline framework. The participants identified TEA regulations as a reference to

special education students and suspensions. Six of the 12 participants referenced the law,

mandatories, or 10 out-of-placements as regulations to make discipline decisions for special

education students.

Theme 2: Parent Involvement. The participants had three questions about their response

to behavior challenges. The three questions were as follows:

1. What considerations, if any, do you take into account before making a discipline or

   behavior decision for students?

2. When a student exhibits persistent misbehavior challenges, how do you respond to

   that behavior?

3. How does your response to discipline/behavior change when you are dealing with a

   student served by special education?

In response to these three questions, parent involvement and homelife were referenced 17 times

by the participants. In response to Question 2, six of the 12 participants relied heavily on parent

involvement to support students with persistent misbehavior. One assistant principal described their considerations and process:

> I look at everything. I mean, I want to look at what's going on in their life. What's going on in their homelife. What's going on with friends? What is their background? Is there abuse in their background? Is their neglect in their background? I mean, and again, you want to figure out why that behavior is happening, if you can figure that out. Sometimes it's, it's pretty apparent and easy to figure out with a kid. And then other times, they're really good and masterful at hiding their needs because they've had to for so long.

The participants all mentioned that it is essential to figure out what is behind the behavior and referenced homelife. One assistant principal said, "I take into consideration the student; I take into account their life. What do I know about their home situation and why they may be behaving that way?" The homelife struggles mentioned were parents working two jobs, lack of structure at home, poverty, parents also struggled in school, cultural disconnect, and a lack of discipline at home.

      Theme 3: Behavior Has Purpose. Minority students served by special education have various needs, and their behavior is affected by their needs, as mentioned by the participants. Special education students are identified with specific learning challenges. Nine of the 12 participants stated that they felt like the special education students' needs were challenging to meet. The challenges the participants mentioned were a lack of trust, boredom, lack of academic skills, and the ability to regulate emotions. The participants made 16 comments regarding teacher frustration and a lack of teacher training on supporting special education students. The comments were that it is difficult to meet the needs, emotional and social needs are not addressed in training, and teachers do not know how to cater to their needs. The comments from five of the 12

participants indicated that the teachers need support with special education students. Eight participants out of 12 stated that the students' disability is a factor that affected student behavior.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was, What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students? The themes that emerged were as follows:

1. School leaders are role models for students.

2. Relationships are essential to building an inclusive school environment.

3. Race and socioeconomic status affect students' experiences in school.

The interview questions that supported this question were as follows:

1. As a school leader, what impact do you think your current role has on student behavior?

2. Historically, students in minority groups have higher suspension and DAEP rates. In your opinion, why is race a factor?

3. Minority students served by special education have a higher rate of DAEP placements. Why do you think this group continues to be at risk compared to other student groups? What are the factors?

Theme 1: School Leaders as Role Models. The participants identified their role in supporting behavior as necessary. Twelve of the 12 participants stated that their role impacted student behavior significantly. The school leaders identified modeling behavior and being role models as a primary function of their positions. Eight of 12 participants stated that they model for students, guide students, and serve as a role model for behavior. Modeling for the adults was

mentioned by six of the 12 participants. The following quote is how one of the assistant

principals described being a role model:

> I think that you are a direct role model, and not only are you a role model for students,
>
> but you're a role model for teachers and the interactions that we have between our
>
> students, our professionalism, and that we're kind of the leader of, of keeping why we do
>
> the job, why we're here, we're here for the kids and that we have an intrinsic drive. Also,
>
> we have an intrinsic drive for what we do in education. So I feel like my role as a leader
>
> influences students, it influences teachers, and it influences even parents and the
>
> community around me. So I take it very seriously to always keep at the forefront of what
>
> my purpose is and how I, as a person, how I am modeling those.

There were 44 value codes identified by the participants when asked how school leaders

could support minority special education students and maintain consistent discipline/behavior

expectations. The values that the school leaders identified fell into three categories: support all

stakeholders, teach students appropriate behaviors, and nurture the whole child. The following

statement is from an assistant principal and demonstrates the value of teacher support as they

work with minority special education students:

> They have to mold teachers into knowing how to interact with these students. We have a
>
> problem right now in America where we don't have teachers that have any idea how to
>
> teach. They come into this job because they need a job, not because they want to teach.
>
> And so then they had no idea. So then, when they get frustrated, the drive doesn't push
>
> them. They just want to give up. And the giving up means, I'm just going to write them
>
> up and get them out of my class. And so as school leaders, we have to be able to teach
>
> them how to deal with students—if all different, whether race sped, low SES, you know.

Even kids that are well off, they can be problems too.

Theme 2: Relationships. The participants identified relationships with students, parents, and teachers as vital to support minority special education students with behavior. Twelve of the 12 participants mentioned relationships in their interview. The participants discussed relationships in two categories: adult relationships and relationships with students. The following statement demonstrates the viewpoint of one assistant principal on student relationships:

I think that we have to look past the color of their skin. We've got to look past their eco

disc. We have to look past all those things and get to the root of the problem and find out

the kid and find out why they're acting and doing all these things. And so I think that we

build a relationship with them. We don't care what color you are. We don't care how

much money you have. We don't care how smart you are. Ultimately, we have to build a

relationship with you first. And I think that we do a really good job of that.

Value codes were used to identify the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the participants. In the relationship theme, the belief code identified common beliefs among the participants. The beliefs that were identified that impact student relationships were emotional support, listening, and attention.

There were two groups identified that affected adult relationships. The participants specified relationships with school staff and relationships with parents as essential in schools. Adults in the school identified as necessary in dealing with student relationships were teachers, administrators, and counselors. There were six participants out of 12 who identified adult relationships as a key to support students.

Theme 3: Race and Socioeconomic Status. Participants identified race and socioeconomic status as factors that affected DAEP placements for minority special education

students. Six of the 12 participants believed that race is a factor that affects students at school. Six of the 12 identified socioeconomic status as more of a factor than race. Twelve of 12 participants connected race to a low socioeconomic status. The question that elicited the most responses was the following: Students in minority groups have higher suspension and DAEP rates. In your opinion, why is race a factor? The beliefs, values, and attitudes identified around race are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Sample of Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes Identified by Participants

Belief	Value	Attitude
Race has always been a factor	Low economic status	Generational
Minorities at the bottom of the hierarchy	Training	Racially driven
Minorities are angry	Language	Schools lack resources
Lack of trust	Minorities are free with expression	Education is not important to minority families
Inferior	White school norms	Survival
Poor Violent	Code-switching	Race is not targeted
Different cultures	Lack of opportunity	Not challenged in school
Different lifestyles	Working families	Lack of experiences
Lack of parenting	Lack of health care	Minorities externalize behavior
Race is related to culture		
Segregated systems		

There were 74 statements coded as beliefs from all 12 participants. The belief statements were in three categories: emotional, cultural, and societal. The emotional belief statements identified how minority students are perceived in a school setting. The emotions identified were anger, inferiority, a lack of trust, and a notion of emotional walls built around race. The cultural beliefs identified focused on lifestyle choices, parenting styles, and generational ideas surrounding race. The third category of belief statements was societal beliefs. The beliefs affected by society were poverty, a race-related cultural hierarchy, and segregated reporting systems.

The 39 value statements that were collected described the societal values that minorities faced within the school setting. The values were classified as White middle-class norms, lack of access to resources, and lack of cultural awareness. The participants identified that school norms and expectations were built on White middle-class values. The value codes demonstrated that students of color and different cultural backgrounds do not naturally identify with these values. One participant stated, "Minorities are free with their language, and sometimes it's more vulgar." The freedom of expression with language created a barrier in a school environment, according to two participants. The lack of access to care, according to three participants, created barriers at a young age. The participants pointed out that students cannot attend school if they do not have immunizations, which creates a lack of trust. Also noted by participants was that students need medications but do not have access to them. It can affect their behavior at school.

Value codes supported me in understanding the participants' beliefs, values, and attitudes concerning the overrepresentation of minority students in DAEP placements. There were 56 attitude codes discovered when participants responded to questions about race. The attitude codes fell into several categories: generational, lack of school resources to support students of

color, and minorities disconnected from the education system. An example of the disconnect between homelife and school that one participant experienced as an assistant principal is as follows: "I remember I was really surprised the first time I contacted a parent, where two African American students had gotten in a fight, and the first thing the parent asked me was, did my kid win?" The participant pointed out that survival was often more important than education.

Document Analysis

The documents reviewed for this study were related to the discipline processes for the school district. The two essential documents that outlined the district's expectations and procedures for parents and students were the student code of conduct and the parent/student handbook. The documents that support assistant principals, counselors, and district discipline personnel were the behavior response to intervention checklist, Tier 2 behavior contract, teacher input form for functional behavior assessment, student management framework, and DAEP placement processes. The documents were analyzed using a content analysis method focused on the research questions.

The questions on the rubric for the document analysis are listed below:

1. Are there guidelines for students with disabilities present in the documents?
2. What processes are outlined in the documents to support students with behavior?
3. What processes are present in the documents to support assistant principals and counselors with behavior or discipline decisions?
4. Is there any language used to support cultural or racial awareness?

The two categories used to organize the documents were parent and student documents and staff documents.

Parent and Student Documents

      The first two documents analyzed were the student code of conduct and the secondary parent/student handbook. The student code of conduct outlines in detail the expectations for students academically and behaviorally. The student code of conduct is available on the district website, and parents could get paper copies printed at any school. Assistant principals used this document as a reference to support behavior and discipline decisions. The student code of conduct's significant components were school district authority and jurisdiction, standards for conduct, general conduct violations, discipline management techniques, removal for educational settings, DAEP placements, and expulsions.

      The first question on the rubric for the document analysis was, Are there guidelines for students with disabilities present in the documents? The student code of conduct addressed students with disabilities on pages 5, 12, 14, 17, 18, and 20. The following excerpt is from page 12:

> **Students With Disabilities.** The discipline of students with disabilities is subject to applicable state and federal law in addition to the Student Code of Conduct. To the extent any conflict exists, the District shall comply with federal law.
>
>   In accordance with the Education Code, a student who receives special education services may not be disciplined for conduct meeting the definition of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, or making hit lists (see glossary) until an ARD committee meeting has been held to review the conduct.
>
>   In deciding whether to order suspension, DAEP placement, or expulsion, regardless of whether the action is mandatory or discretionary, the District shall take into

consideration a disability that substantially impairs the student's capacity to appreciate
the wrongfulness of the student's conduct.

The references about students with disabilities in the student code of conduct identified with
terms such as "IEP," "a disability that substantially impairs," "federal law," and "IDEA of
1974."

The next document reviewed was the secondary student handbook. The student handbook
addressed students with disabilities from an identification stance on pages 31, 32, and 85. The
language in the handbook referred to the annual review and dismissal (ARD) process. The main
areas addressed in this document were academic. All references to behavior referred parents and
students to the student code of conduct.

The second question addressed the following: What processes are outlined in the
documents to support students with behavior? There were techniques and expectations for
supporting student behavior listed on pages 8, 12, and 13 of the student code of conduct. There
were 15 out of 41 techniques that were not punitive and were considered proactive supports. The
preliminary intervention and behavior intervention process were not outlined in the student code
of conduct. The following excerpt is the description of expected student conduct on page 8:

Each student is expected to:

- Demonstrate courtesy, even when others do not.

- Behave in a responsible manner, always exercising self-discipline.

- Attend all classes regularly and on time.

- Prepare for each class; take appropriate materials and assignments to class.

- Meet district and campus standards of grooming and dress.

- Obey all campus and classroom rules.

- Respect the rights and privileges of students, teachers, and other district staff and volunteers.

- Respect the property of others, including district property and facilities.

- Cooperate with and assist the school staff in maintaining safety, order, and discipline.

- Adhere to the requirements of the Student Code of Conduct.

The parent/student handbook generally referred to the student code of conduct when behavior was a concern. The handbook outlined ISS and long-term ISS on page 55. The zero tolerance policy toward fighting and violence is on page 57. Counseling and mental health supports are on pages 58 and 103. The district outlined parent and family engagement on pages 104 and 105 in the handbook. The parent/student handbook did not outline positive behavior intervention processes.

The next questions addressed in the document study over parent and student documents were as follows:

1. What processes are present in the document to support assistant principals and counselors with behavior or discipline decisions?

2. Is there any language used to support cultural or racial awareness?

The nature of the language in the student code of conduct and the parent/student handbook is informative for these stakeholders. The information in the student code of conduct details behavior situations that students could encounter at school. The items that support staff were expectations for behavior are on page 8 of the student code of conduct. The processes for ISS, OSS, and DAEP are listed on pages 15–26. The discretionary placement clause for DAEP is on page 18. The student code of conduct further explains persistent misconduct on page 38.

The language in the student code of conduct and the parent/student handbook is neutral and legal. The final question was challenging for me to identify. There was language found that recognized culture on page 23 of the parent/student handbook. The description on page 23 outlined exceptions for moral and religious beliefs. A nondiscrimination clause is on page 46 about placement in CTE programs, and an overall description of discrimination is on page 62 of the handbook. There is a formal nondiscrimination clause on page 103. I did not identify the language in the student code of conduct related to culture, race, or diversity.

Staff Documents

The reviewed documents that staff used to support student discipline were the behavior response to intervention checklist, Tier 2 behavior contract, the teacher input form for functional behavior assessment, the student management framework, and the DAEP placement processes. The documents used by assistant principals, counselors, and district personnel were analyzed with the first question: Are there guidelines for students with disabilities present in the documents? The documents reviewed that did not mention special education students were the DAEP transition process, Tier 2 behavior contract, teacher input form for functional behavior assessment, and the behavior checklist.

The documents that mentioned special education students were the student behavior management framework and the behavioral response to intervention checklist. The framework mentions special education referrals on pages 21 and 22 and in the appendix. On pages 21 and 22, special education is in the Tier 3 process. In the appendix on page 35, special education is an independent box that contains responses to behavior. The supports listed are modification for instructional level, content mastery support, behavior intervention plan, and PASS support.

The second question used to analyze the school personnel documents was, What processes are outlined in the documents to support students' behavior? The student behavior management framework lists four strategies for helping students with behavior. The four strategies are positive behavior supports, behavioral response to intervention, campus behavior management plans, and classroom discipline procedures. The two major trainings that are utilized for staff members in these documents are CHAMPS and Restorative Discipline. CHAMPS training supports teachers with classroom management, a framework for movement in the classroom, voice level expectations, and classroom communication tools. The Restorative Discipline training teaches staff members how to connect with students, work through conflict, and build a classroom of mutual respect.

The first strategy was positive behavior supports, and it had four components: Foundations, CHAMPS, Restorative Discipline, and Trust-Based Relational Interventions (TBRI). The Foundations framework listed the rules, procedures, and expectations for all common areas on campuses. The common areas established were hallways, cafeteria, restrooms, assemblies, and recess. Each common area's procedures included a goal, consequences for infractions, encouragement procedures, supervision responsibilities, and teacher responsibilities. The second positive behavior support listed was CHAMPS. CHAMPS is a classroom management framework developed by Randy Sprick. The student framework gave an overview of CHAMPS and provides examples of classroom rules, expectations, consequences, and procedures. The third positive behavior support was Restorative Discipline. The framework gave an overview of Restorative Discipline and listed three goals. The three goals for Restorative Discipline were accountability, community safety, and skill development. The final support was

TBRI, and the framework outlined three principles for that support. The three principles were empowering, connecting, and correcting.

The following strategies in the student management framework were behavioral response to intervention (BRTI) and campus and classroom management plans. The BRTI section detailed response to intervention strategies and the framework. The framework included a tiered system of support for students and explained the Tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions and processes. The campus and classroom management sections listed how to create management plans to support positive student interactions and provide safe environments.

The other documents reviewed were the DAEP transition process, Tier 2 behavior contract, teacher input form for functional behavior, and behavior checklist. One out of four documents listed included student supports. The Tier 2 behavior contract included student supports by listing the students' rights and student behavior expectations.

The third question on the rubric used to review the documents was, What processes are present in the document to support assistant principals and counselors with behavior or discipline decisions? The student management framework outlined campus procedures for handling student behavior on pages 23–33. The framework outlined minor and major student behavior infractions, response to intervention strategies, effective correction techniques, and office referral procedures.

The teacher input form for functional behavior asked for teachers' perspectives on individual students' actions. The form asked teachers to describe the students' strengths, behavior concerns, behavior triggers, and how the student responds. This document was used in conjunction with the behavior checklist and the Tier 2 behavior contract. The assistant principals and counselors used the form to develop behavior intervention plans.

The behavior checklist explained the intervention steps for violent and nonviolent offenses. The violent offenses do not have a tiered response system, and the nonviolent responses have Tiers 1, 2, and 3 responses. The assistant principals used this checklist to document all processes and interventions used to support student behavior. The district expectation is that the behavior checklist is completed before DAEP hearings are held for students.

The DAEP transition process document outlined the steps each administrator and counselor takes to support students as they transition from DAEP to campus. The document included timelines for staff members to complete meetings and exit and entrance interviews with students and parents as they transition back to campus. The assistant principals and counselors used this process to review student records and develop transition plans for students returning to campus from DAEP.

The final rubric question used to analyze the school personnel documents was, Is there any language used to support cultural or racial awareness? The DAEP transition process, Tier 2 behavior contract, teacher input form for functional behavior, and the behavior checklist did not include language classified as cultural or racial awareness. The student management framework included a nondiscrimination statement on page 3 of the document.

Student Discipline Data Review

The archival data reviewed used the Texas Education Agency reports the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) and the Results Driven Accountability (RDA). The PDMAS was used from 2004 to 2018 by TEA to monitor school performance. The RDA replaced the PBMAS report in 2019. The PBMAS reports contained analysis of STAAR data for English language learners, career and technology education, No Child Left Behind indicators, and special education performance measures. The RDA reports contained analysis of STAAR

data for English language learners, career and technology education, Every Student Succeeds Act indicators, and special education performance measures. The data reviewed for this research were the special education discipline data.

The PBMAS reports for the 2015–2018 school years reported special education discipline data for the central Texas 6A urban school district. The indicators reviewed were special education students' discretionary discipline placements, ISS placements, OSS placements, and overall special education removals. The state used a cut score in 2015–2017, and the disproportionality rate was considered significant if the rate was over 10 cut points (see Table 3). In 2018 TEA used a risk ratio to report the data, and the disproportionality rate was significant if the risk ratio was greater than 2.5 (see Table 4).

Table 3

2015–2017 PBMAS Data on Student Discretionary Placements

School year	Discretionary DAEP disproportionality rate	Discretionary ISS disproportionality rate	Discretionary OSS disproportionality rate
2015	5.9	19.0	90.0
2016	50.0	31.8	106.9
2017[a]	No data set	No data set	No data set

a. The 2017 PBMAS did not include report-only items.

Table 4

2018 PBMAS Data on Student Discipline Removals

Variables	OSS and expulsion > 10	ISS > 10	Total removals
All students	1.6	2.4	91.8
African American	Data set masked	4.7	172.5
Disproportionality risk ratio	13.3	6.6	3.3

The PBMAS report for 2015–2017 in Table 3 indicated a disproportionality present for special education students. In 2015 the discretionary ISS and OSS placements were above the 10 cut points. In 2016 DAEP, ISS, and OSS rates were above the 10 cut points that TEA considered significant. The 2018 PBMAS report indicated special education African American students had a considerable risk ratio in OSS, expulsion, and ISS placements greater than 10 days. The total disciplinary removal rate for African American students was above 2.5 and significant, with a risk of 3.3.

I used RDA reports for 2019–2020 to analyze special education students' discipline rates. The RDA used a cut score of 10 points for OSS, expulsion, and ISS rates. The cut score for total disciplinary removals was 19 points. The risk ratio for disproportionality was any score greater than 2.5 (see Table 5).

Table 5

RDA Data on Student Discipline Removals

Variables	OSS and expulsion >10	ISS > 10	Total removals
2019 all students	1.3	2.0	93.0
2019 African American	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported
2020 all students	1.1	2.8	98.3
2020 African American risk ratio	8.5	4.9	3.0

The cut points were above 19 for total disciplinary removals for all special education students in 2019 and 2020, indicating significant disproportionality. In 2020 the risk ratio was greater than 2.5 for African American special education students in OSS placements more than 10 days, ISS placements more than 10 days, and total removals. This risk ratio for disproportionality was significant, according to TEA.

The PBMAS reports and the RDA report indicated disproportionality for minority special education students in discipline removals. The PBMAS reports indicated that ISS, OSS, and DAEP removals were disproportionate for minority special education students and that African American students were the most at risk. The RDA report showed that African American special education students had a significant risk ratio for all discipline removals. The TEA reports demonstrated that the school district had a disproportionate number of discipline removals for minority special education students from 2015–2020.

The two TEA reports used to analyze the special education discipline ratios indicated significant disproportionality. The indicators were different based on the change in reports from

the PBMAS to the RDA. The PBMAS from 2015–2017 reported removals for ISS, OSS, expulsion, and DAEP placements. In 2018 the PBMAS reported ISS, OSS, and total removals; the RDA report continued with the same categories in 2019–2020. The 6A urban school district demonstrated disproportionality for minority special education students in each report.

Summary

Chapter 4 described assistant principals, counselors, and district leaders' perspectives on the overrepresentation of minority students in DAEP placements and how school leaders affected discipline decisions. This chapter discussed the results from the interviews, the document analysis, and student discipline data. The research questions guided the study and supported me by organizing the data. The data presented in Chapter 4 answered the research questions on the overrepresentation of minority students in DAEP placements. The interviews provided insight into school leaders' perspectives on student discipline and district processes. The document analysis reviewed critical documents used to communicate and guide student discipline decisions. The archival data reviewed were used to analyze TEA performance reports from 2015 to 2020. The data triangulation allowed me to understand the district's expectations, processes, and accountability systems.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendation

The 6A urban school district in central Texas studied has experienced an overrepresentation of minority special education students in discipline removals, including DAEP placements. Across the United States in public schools, minority students served by special education have been disproportionally affected by exclusionary discipline practices (Bell, 2016). Despite the research and the federal policies that protect students of color and students with disabilities, this continues to be an issue across the nation (Bell, 2016). The disparities have increased in the last decade due to the use of zero tolerance discipline policies; the end to zero tolerance policies was called for in 2014 by the Obama administration (Triplett et al., 2014).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to draw conclusions about the disparities in DAEP placements for minority special education students from the interviews and understand the perceptions of assistant principals, counselors, and district-level administrators on how school leaders affect discipline decisions. The qualitative case study involved interviews with assistant principals, counselors, and central office administrators; the interviews were semistructured. The data from the interviews were triangulated with a document study and an analysis of student discipline data. The use of NVivo codes and value codes supported the interview data interpretation and the identification of themes. Themes were identified for each research question.

Despite the differences in each participant's role in education and the variance in their years of experience, six themes emerged. The first three themes were identified from the conclusions about disparities in DAEP placements from the interviews. The three themes were (a) school leaders' experience and training impact student discipline, (b) parent involvement and homelife affect student behavior at school, and (c) behavior serves a purpose. When the

perceptions of the participants about how school leaders affect discipline decisions were analyzed, three themes were identified: (a) school leaders are role models, (b) school leaders' relationships are essential in building an inclusive environment, and (c) race and economic status affect students' experiences in school.

Chapter 5 discusses the qualitative case study's findings, analyzes the findings using the critical race theory and the self-determination theory, and reviews the study's future implications. The research questions that guided the discussion were as follows:

RQ1: What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups?

RQ2: What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students?

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

The first research question was, What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups? The themes identified in the interviews were years of experience and training for campus-based administrators impacted student discipline decisions, parent involvement and homelife made a difference in student behavior, and behavior served a purpose and fulfilled a need.

Theme 1: Years of Experience/Training. The participants identified years of experience as necessary in understanding and supporting special education students with

behavior. The assistant principals', counselors', and district level administrators' years of experience varied from 1 year of experience in their current role to 20 years in their current position. The six assistant principals with less than 2 years of experience mentioned that they did not initially consider students' special education status when making discipline decisions. In their first year of school leadership, the three assistant principals did not feel adequately trained to handle special education students regarding discipline. The dean of students with the most experience stated that years of experience guided their discipline decisions.

The lack of training for assistant principals as they enter public school administration is documented in the literature. DeMatthews (2016) found that school administrators needed to step outside what they learned in preparation programs to meet students' diverse needs and support students of color. The research findings are consistent with the literature and demonstrate the need for school districts to step outside traditional methods to support assistant principals with discipline decisions.

The training goals the 6A urban school district prescribed for the assistant principals and counselors included CPI, TBRI, CHAMPS, and Restorative Discipline. The Restorative Discipline training was mentioned by seven out of 10 assistant principals and counselors; it was the most noted training by all participants. The CHAMPS training was not mentioned by the counselors or assistant principals. The district-level administrators mentioned training over the discipline framework; one out of 10 counselors and assistant principals mentioned the discipline framework. The campus-level administrators and counselors had a different perception of the required training than the district-level administrators. The district-level administrators were consistent with their responses and described each model. The campus personnel were

inconsistent with their answers, and three of the participants voiced that they did not feel adequately trained.

Campus leaders impact student discipline and behavior daily, and training campus leaders to support students with consistent responses is a critical factor in overcoming racial disparities. The findings are consistent with the literature that demonstrates that adequately trained campus personnel can change school discipline culture (Heilbrun et al., 2015). Campus leaders who focus on intervention methods and positive approaches are more successful at closing the school discipline's racial gap (Heilbrun et al., 2015). The inconsistent responses from campus leaders demonstrated a disconnect with the training methods the district has implemented.

Theme 2: Parent Involvement. The 12 interview participants mentioned parent involvement and homelife as factors that affected students' behavior and their responses to students' behavior. The factors identified were lack of structure, lack of trust in the school, a cultural disconnect, and no home discipline. These findings are consistent with the literature that showed that parent education level and being exposed to adults with risky behavior directly correlate to student suspension rates (Mizel et al., 2016).

The participants utilized parent involvement to support students with academics, behavior, and relationships at school. The school personnel interviewed relied heavily on parent involvement and support from home to address student misbehavior. Parent involvement and learning about students' homelife are positive approaches to school discipline. The reliance on parent support demonstrates that the participants understand that school-to-home connections are imperative. However, an overreliance on parent involvement could have negative consequences for students, given that a lack of parental support was a factor identified that affected behavior at school.

Theme 3: Behavior Has Purpose. The challenges that led to misbehavior for special education students were a lack of trust, boredom, lack of academic skills, and the inability to regulate emotions. The failure to meet special education students' needs was a concern for the participants. There were 16 comments from the participants related to teachers' lack of training and frustration regarding special education students' behavior. The participants expressed that students use actions to communicate their needs or a lack of skill, but teachers need support with recognizing the need.

The literature on special education students is consistent with the concerns expressed by the participants. Texas has struggled to fund special education programs adequately since 2008 (Michaels, 2018). Schools in Texas with increasing special education enrollment are not keeping pace with special education funding (R. Perry & Hawthorn, 2018). The lack of funding could affect staffing and training for students served by special education.

Research Question 2

The second research question explored the following: What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students? The themes identified were school leaders are role models for students, relationships are essential to building an inclusive school environment, and race and socioeconomic status affect students' experiences. The themes were analyzed with value codes and categorized into belief, attitude, or value statements.

Theme 1: School Leaders as Role Models. The assistant principals, counselors, dean of students, and central office administrators identified modeling behavior and serving as role models as an integral part of their job. The participants felt that their role impacted student

behavior significantly. The participants who had campus leadership roles believed that it was their responsibility to be role models and demonstrate appropriate behavior. The two Hispanic participants pointed out that students need to see someone that looks like them at school. One participant stated, "I think that me being Hispanic and a male—a lot of students look at that because they see somebody that looks like them. So they gravitate towards that, and they want to make sure they see somebody like that here in the community." The statement demonstrates that being a role model also encompasses race for leaders of color.

The value codes collected for this category were categorized into three areas: supporting all stakeholders, teaching appropriate behaviors, and nurturing the whole child. Students of color served by special education have different needs, and the value codes collected demonstrated that the participants' had an awareness of the conditions.

Theme 2: Relationships. Interactions with students at school build on each experience they have, and the participants identified relationships as a key to creating a positive environment for minority students. The two categories of relationships identified were adult relationships and relationships with students. The value codes identified common beliefs that impact student relationships among the participants. The shared ideas were that students need emotional support, someone to listen, and attention. The common understanding among the participants demonstrated a correlation to the restorative discipline work the district has implemented.

The findings are consistent with the literature that describe social justice in schools. Building relationships in schools with all stakeholders supports assistant principals in working with students to solve behavior issues (Carpenter et al., 2017). Students in at-risk settings benefit from collaborative relationships and focus on "we-centered" partnerships (Carpenter et al.,

2017). Authentic connections benefit students and support positive behavior (DeMatthews, 2016). The assistant principals, counselors, and central office administration recognize that relationships are critical in changing school discipline culture for minority special education students.

     Theme 3: Race and Socioeconomic Status. Race and socioeconomic status were identified as factors that affected students at school and their perceptions of school. Six of the participants believed that socioeconomic status was more of a factor than race. Socioeconomic status was linked to race by the participants. Three of the participants that identified race as a factor were minorities. All three mentioned that race was a factor that affected their personal experience at school. The connection to a socioeconomic status almost seemed automatic in response to the question, "Why is race a factor?"

     The value codes collected from the participants' interviews that demonstrated race was a factor were grouped into beliefs, values, or attitudes and categorized. Three categories were identified from the value codes classified as beliefs. The three categories were emotional beliefs, societal beliefs, and cultural beliefs. The different levels of belief statements demonstrated that the participants believed race affects multiple aspects of minority special education students' lives. The value statements identified that White middle-class norms in schools are a value that affected how minority students responded to school expectations. The attitude statements brought out that poverty and racial issues are generational and have caused minorities to be disconnected from the education system.

     The literature supports the findings from the study about race and socioeconomic status. Students with better-educated parents are less likely to be subjected to harsh discipline at school (Mizel et al., 2016). A parent's level of education is often directly related to socioeconomic

status and race. Mizel et al. (2016) suggested that interventions that support students with reducing drug use and promoting good grades could reduce the disproportionality found for minority students.

Additional Findings

The document analysis and the student data review supported me with triangulation and brought tangible evidence to the study. The document analysis reviewed documents used by assistant principals and counselors to help students with behavior. The student data review analyzed TEA annual reports that described discipline trends and data for the 6A urban school district. The interviews, document study, and data analysis allowed me to understand the processes used to support students with behavior fully.

The student code of conduct and parent/student handbook revealed that the language was informational and used to support parents and students with school discipline's legal side. The student code of conduct listed 41 techniques used for behavior correction, and 15 techniques were positive and not considered punitive. The information in the student code of conduct related to students with disabilities was legal and procedural. The parent/student handbook focused primarily on academics in reference to students with disabilities. There were very few references to race, culture, or diversity in either document.

The documents for school personnel reviewed fell into three categories: behavior intervention documents, student management framework, and the DAEP placement processes. These documents are used by counselors and assistant principals to support students with behavior. The documents that did not mention special education were the DAEP processes, Tier 2 behavior contract, functional behavior assessment, and behavior checklist. Special education was mentioned in the student management framework and the behavioral response to the

intervention checklist. The strategies identified in the documents used to support students with behavior were positive behavior supports, BRTI, behavior management plans, and classroom discipline procedures. One document included language that supported racial awareness, and that was the nondiscrimination clause in the student management framework.

The student data review used the PBMAS reports and RDA reports to analyze student data trends. The data review revealed that the 6A urban school district had struggled with disproportionate discipline for minority special education students from 2015 to 2020. Special education African American students were more likely to be placed in exclusionary discipline placements. In 2019 the removal rate for all students to OSS or expulsion greater than 10 days was 1.1; the removal rate for African American students was 8.5. This was significant disproportionality. The reports demonstrated that the assistant principals struggled with making discipline decisions that did not include exclusionary practices.

Theoretical Framework Discussion

The critical race theory and the self-determination theory were used to examine the participants' viewpoints and understand student behavior's motivation. The critical race theory interprets race as a social construct and as institutionalized in society and holds that social and historical analysis of race issues is essential (Simson, 2014). The self-determination theory identifies that three innate needs influence social development (Emery & Heath, 2016). The needs identified are autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Emery & Heath, 2016). The theories served as a basis for the research and provided two perceptions for interpreting the results. The self-determination theory was utilized to analyze student needs and replacement behavior. The critical race theory was used to interpret the perceptions of the counselors,

assistant principals, and school district personnel regarding the overrepresentation of minority special education students in DAEP placements.

School administrators make discipline decisions for minority students and have their own experiences and perceptions of race that influence their decisions. The assistant principals, counselors, and school district administrators each brought a different viewpoint of race to the interview discussion. The White participants in the study used the term "color blind," which directly correlates to the critical race theory. The White participants did not feel that race was an issue with discipline decisions. The participants of color all pointed out that race is an issue because it affects the students and how they perceive the adults in the building. The influence that race has on students and adults in a school setting is imperative to recognize if a change is going to occur.

The self-determination theory states that people will create replacement behaviors when needs are not met (Emery & Heath, 2016). Students often spend the first few years of school developing replacement behaviors that are often negative but get them the attention they need. The assistant principals and counselors were aware that students are trying to fulfill a need when they misbehave. The needs identified in the self-determination theory are autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Emery & Heath, 2016). Minority students served by special education often have academic and behavior needs that require individual education plans. The IEPs put support in place to allow special education students to have access to an equal education. However, years of extra support and the stigma of being special education can affect their ability to relate and feel in control of their education.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative case study analysis consisted of individual interviews, a document study, and an analysis of student discipline reports. The three limitations identified in the study were the number of participants in each group, the size of the school district, and my insider status within the school district. I could not control the limitations in this single case study.

The first limitation identified was the number of participants in each group. The study took place in one school district, which limited the number of participants for each group represented. The counselor group consisted of three participants, and the assistant principal group had six participants. There were two central office administrators and one dean of students. The difference in the participants in each group created an unbalanced response to some of the questions.

The second limitation was the size of the school district studied. The single case study was conducted in one 6A urban school district in central Texas. The size of the school district limited the scope of the study. There were 12 interviews completed for the study, which could limit the responses to the research questions.

The third limitation was my status in the school district. I am a principal in the district. My insider status affected some of the responses from the participants. Despite confidentiality consent and explanations, some of the answers to the interview questions were short and not as truthful as expected. The limited nature of the participants' responses leads me to conclude that the insider status affected the depth of the answers.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for changing how counselors, assistant principals, and district-level administrators respond to the behavior needs of minority special

education students. The school district looked at the discrepancies in the discipline data for minority special education students in the past. However, this study addressed the perceptions of the campus-level personnel responsible for implementing the training and strategies that the district determined to address the problem effectively. The reoccurrence of the discipline discrepancies identified a need to look at the problem from a different angle.

The strategies and approaches used to address minority special education students must involve campus-level stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders can be achieved by keeping a log of each assistant principal's or counselor's training yearly and then assuring that as turnover occurs in these positions, each new counselor or assistant principal is provided the same training opportunities. It will be imperative for the district to connect the training with the discipline discrepancies and have explicit conversations about its impact on minority special education students.

Recommendations

The results of the study revealed several recommendations for future action and research in this area. The recommendations presented are based on the analysis of the perceptions of counselors, assistant principals, the dean of students, and campus-level administrators who participated in the study from the 6A urban school district in central Texas. Building an inclusive school environment that supports minority special education students requires input and investment from all stakeholders. All campus-level administrators must have a common understanding of how race affects students and how to support special education students with behavior and academic needs. Conversations about race and students with special education needs must include teachers, administrators, and parents. Four recommendations were identified based on the findings from the study.

The first recommendation was to provide training that directly correlates to special education students and race. The district has provided a framework for discipline and a comprehensive plan for implementing the selected behavior training for assistant principals and counselors. However, the school district needs to include training that connects the framework and training to practical application with minority special education students. Assistant principals and counselors should be provided support and training on using Restorative Practices, CHAMPS, and TBRI to make informed decisions for minority special education students. Future training should focus on behavior correction that does not overly rely on consequence-based responses.

The second recommendation was to create a plan for engaging in explicit conversations with staff members, students, and parents about race. All stakeholders are affected by their experience with race, and it affects the school environment. All school administrators, counselors, and teachers should engage in conversations that discuss race-related topics and their experiences. Sharing race-related experiences of stakeholders will help all stakeholders understand the implicit and explicit biases of race-related issues. It will also support the district by recognizing that race affects all stakeholders.

The third recommendation was to develop a comprehensive plan for engaging parents in the school environment. Parent involvement directly affects students' success at school with behavior and academics. Each campus should develop a plan to involve parents in decision-making, engage parents in school activities, and support parents with training opportunities. Parents that are comfortable with the school and engage in school activities will feel more connected to the school environment. Parent engagement will allow assistant principals and

counselors the opportunity to connect with parents outside of formal meetings or discipline conversations.

The fourth recommendation was to support campus leaders in developing culturally responsive and inclusive school environments. School environments must create a plan to help all students and establish practices that address race and socioeconomic barriers. Campus leaders would benefit from student focus groups that address students' concerns with exclusion from the school environment, race-related topics, and isolation in school environments. Poverty and race affect students at school, and both issues are challenging for all stakeholders to address. Utilizing platforms like the No Place For Hate program from the Anti-Defamation League will provide the district with a consistent format for building an inclusive school environment.

Researcher's Reflection

As a public educator for 17 years in Texas, I have filled the roles of a classroom teacher, academic advisor, assistant principal, and principal at the elementary and middle school levels. My personal experience with school discipline and minority special education students is that training was not adequately provided to make informed decisions for this student group as an assistant principal. As a middle school principal, I have been directly impacted by school discipline decisions that affect minority special education students. The passion for building inclusive school environments has led me to embrace restorative practices and create rewards-based behavior systems for students that develop a positive school climate. The conversations with assistant principals, counselors, and district-level administrators about race and school discipline were honest and provided insight into their perceptions of the topic.

Summary

This single case study explored the discrepancies in discipline data that exist for minority special education students. The qualitative case study focused on one 6A urban school district in central Texas. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What conclusions can be drawn from interviews with middle school assistant principals and critical school leaders about the disparities in DAEP discipline placements for special education students in minority groups?

RQ2: What are the multiple perspectives of the assistant principals, counselors, and central office staff on how school leaders affect discipline decisions regarding DAEP assignments for minority special education students?

The findings revealed six themes from the research questions. The first three themes were identified from the conclusions about disparities in DAEP placements from the interviews. The three themes were (a) school leaders' experience and training impact student discipline, (b) parent involvement and homelife affect student behavior at school, and (c) behavior serves a purpose. When the perceptions of the participants about how school leaders affect discipline decisions were analyzed, three themes were identified: (a) school leaders are role models, (b) school leaders' relationships are essential in building an inclusive environment, and (c) race and economic status affect students' experiences in school. An analysis of the interview data revealed that the counselors, assistant principals, and district-level personnel that participated in the study understand the need to engage minority special education students and their parents in the school environment.

Building an inclusive school environment that engages all stakeholders takes an intentional plan of action. The assistant principals and counselors had a base-level understanding

that race affects how students perceive school and their behavior. They also had a base-level

understanding that a student's special education status affects their behavior at school.

Developing an action plan to engage campus-level leaders in race discussions intentionally will

benefit the school district by making race-related topics a priority. The minority school leaders

all identified that race is an issue, but leaders that were not minorities grouped race with

economic status. The special education status of students also needs to be addressed to ensure

that leaders are aware of students' needs before making a disciplinary decision. The assistant

principals revealed that they did not consider the special education status before making

discipline decisions early in their careers. The school district should ensure that all assistant

principals understand the link between special education and behavior early in their training. The

connection between race and special education status will support all stakeholders to understand

better building inclusive school environments.

The 6A urban school district has worked for years to address the discrepancies found in

discipline data for minority special education students. The school district has developed a

training platform that is consistent across all campuses. A discipline framework outlines

expectations, interventions, and specific approaches to use to support students with behavior.

The turnover in counselors and assistant principals has caused some gaps in understanding and

training. A revitalization of training models focusing on race and special education students will

help counselors and assistant principals implement proactive strategies.

This qualitative case study aligns with other research on discrepancies in discipline data

for minority special education students. The 6A urban school district in central Texas will benefit

from engaging all stakeholders in a conversation about race and special education. It is critical to

begin developing action plans to engage parents in the school community and engage campus

leaders in building culturally responsive school cultures.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

February 6, 2020

Tiffany Weiss
Department of Education
Abilene Christian University

Dear Tiffany,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "School Leaders and Exclusionary Practices: A Study of Discretionary DAEP Placements for Moniority Special Education Students",

(IRB# 20-002   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Title of the Study: School Leaders and Exclusionary Practices: A Study of Discretionary DAEP Placements for Minority Special Education Students.

- You may be eligible to take part in this research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience.

- Please contact the Principal Investigator if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if at any time you wish to withdraw. The contact information may be found at the end of this form.

Purpose and Description:

- Purpose of the research - The evolution of school discipline and expectations for inclusive school environments in Texas has not been enough to close the gaps for minority and special education students. The statewide discipline data shows that students of color and students with disabilities continue to be over-represented in suspensions and expulsions. The purpose of this study is to examine the discipline practices at three middle school campuses to understand the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of minority special education students in ISS, OSS and district alternative education placements. Responses from individual interviews will help determine how the leaders' experiences or practices influence exclusionary discipline placements.

Expected Duration:

- If selected for participation, school leaders will be asked to interview via telephone, in person, or by electronic meeting. Interviews will consist of seven open ended questions and should last no longer than 30minutes.

Description of the Procedures:

- Study Procedures – 10 school leaders consisting of assistant principals, middle school counselors, and district leaders will be solicited to participate in an interview. Interviews will be scheduled based on convenience of the participants, and the session should not last longer than 30 minutes. The audio from the sessions will be recorded using an audio recording as well as through investigator field notes.

Risk and Benefits:

- The slight risk related to the study is confidentiality. You have the right to leave the study at any time with no repercussions. The researchers will answer all questions before the study begins and assign participants random numbers instead of names for confidentiality purposes. The researcher will also securely maintain all data locked in a filing cabinet in the investigator's office until five years after the completion of the study. Under no

circumstances will anyone other than the investigator be allowed to know the names of the participants in the study. If you experience any problems, you may contact Tiffany Weiss at xxxxxxxxxx or xxxxxxx@acu.edu. There are no wrong or right answers and you may skip any question you do not feel comfortable answering. The researchers and ACU do not have any plan to pay for any injuries or problems you may experience as a result of your participation in this research.

The researchers cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study. However, the researchers hope that the information learned from this study will help others in similar situation in the future.

Alternative Procedures: NA

Privacy and Confidentiality:
Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected be assigning a coded number to each participant interviewed in place of the participant's name, to keep the transcribed responses completely confidential. All transcribed data will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study to ensure confidentiality further.

Contacts:
You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study. The Principal Investigator, Tiffany Weiss, may be contacted at xxxxxxxxxx, xxxxxxxxx@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact Dr. Amy Barrios at xxxxxxx@acu.edu. If you have any concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at:
xxxxxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxx@acu.edu
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Script prior to the interview:

I'd like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As I have mentioned to you before, my study seeks to understand discipline disparities for special education minority students. The study also seeks to understand how school leaders affect discipline decisions. The aim of this research is to understand the overrepresentation of minority special education students in discretionary district alternative education placements.

Our interview today will last approximately one hour during which I will be asking you about your educational experience, your experience as an educational leader, and your experience with student discipline.
[review aspects of consent form]

I sent you a copy of the consent via email, you completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation.

Are you still ok with me recording (or not) our conversation today? Yes No

If yes: *Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.*

If no: *Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our*

conversation. Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?

[Discuss questions]

If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time.

Sample Research Questions:

1. At this time, I would like to ask you to tell me a little about yourself, your educational background and your years of experience?

2. As a school leader, what impact do you think your current role has on student behavior?

3. What supports or training have you been provided that have prepared you to respond to student behavior?

4.   What training or supports have been provided that help you with students who have special needs or who are served by special education?

5.   What considerations, if any, do you take into account before making discipline/behavior decisions for students?

6.   When a student exhibits persistent behavior challenges, how do you respond to the behavior?

7.   How does your response to discipline/behavior change when you are dealing with a student served by special education?

8.   Historically students in minority groups have higher suspension and DAEP rates. In your opinion, why is race a factor?

9.   Minority students served by special education have an even higher rate of DAEP placements. Why do you think this group continues to be at risk compared to other student groups? What are the factors?

10.   How can school leaders support minority special education students and maintain consistent discipline/behavior practices?

Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you would like to share in regards to student discipline or your experience as an educational leader that we have not discussed.