UNIVERSITY OF REDLANDS

The Effect of Administrators' Disciplinary Practices on the
Educational Trajectory of African American Students

A dissertation presented in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Leadership for Educational Justice

By
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ABSTRACT
The Effect of Administrators' Disciplinary Practices on the
Educational Trajectory of African American Students
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This qualitative phenomenological research study examined the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. Administrators collect information from teachers and other school employees to determine how students should be disciplined based on policy, rules, and procedures, all involving a level of discretionary decision making. Open-ended interview questions were used to gain information from 15 school site administrators holding the position of principal or assistant principal in a TK–12th-grade urban school district in southern California. The analyzed data centered on seven themes from the participants' responses based on their lived experiences as school site administrators: (a) policies, rules, and procedures; (b) biases related to school discipline; (c) administrator discretion in discipline decisions; (d) participant impact on students; (e) participant impact on African American students; (f) influence of race on discipline decisions; and (g) culturally responsive school leadership. These findings could assist school site administrators and leaders with information to make equitable decisions that are applied to African American students to reduce the discipline gap in education between African American students and students of other racial groups. All stakeholders in schools come with predispositions and biases and each person must learn to set aside prejudices in order to construct a new learning paradigm. A positive school culture can influence a student's performance and how the student behaves in school.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, [REDACTED]. He encouraged me to pursue my studies and never doubted that I could complete this work. I love him for being who he is and allowing me to shine! I also dedicate this dissertation to my sons, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. I want them to know how much I love them and how proud I am of the young men they have become. They should keep striving to attain academic excellence and higher education. No one can ever take their education from them; it is one of their greatest accomplishments.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The discipline gap for African American students continues to widen in America's public schools. Rocque (2010) indicated that African American students were more likely to be referred to the office than other racial groups and there is a racial disparity in the discipline. Similarly, A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) found a gap in discipline between African American students and students of other ethnic groups. African American students are disproportionately represented in discipline referrals written by teachers. M. Hoffman (2012) noted that, from the 1960s through the 1980s, African American students were suspended from school and received discipline referrals equaling three times more than White students. Fenning and Rose (2007) focused on more than 30 years of research pointing to the overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline practices in American schools. Wu (1980, as cited in Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010) found that discipline rates were based more on school factors than on challenging behaviors of students. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students as experienced by the school site administrator.

Background of the Problem

When the discussion is focused on the disparities of African American students in the educational system, much of the attention is placed on academic outcomes. Racial disparity in how students are disciplined is evident in American schools. Schools tend to rely on exclusionary disciplinary practices that have a disproportionate impact on African American, Latino, and American Indian students (A. Gregory et al., 2010). The history of exclusionary discipline practices may contribute to the racial gaps in academic achievement and determine the trajectory of a student's school career. A large body of research shows that African American

students are more likely than any other racial group to be disciplined in schools (Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Bal, 2016; Butchart & McEwan, 1998; DeMatthews, 2016; Englehart, 2014; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Findlay, 2012; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; J. F. Gregory, 1997; A. Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Losen, 2015; Skiba, 2014; Townsend, 2000; Walker-Dalhouse, 2005). This startling fact has fueled much debate. Data show consistent patterns of African American students being disciplined at a higher rate than other races in the past 40 years, especially in terms of school suspensions and expulsions (A. Gregory et al., 2010). This racial imbalance has resulted in disparities among student groups that have contributed to racial achievement and discipline gaps.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2000) pointed to certain demographic characteristics as a primary reason for the racial discipline gap in schools. Such factors include poverty and residing in high-crime/high-poverty neighborhoods, which may lead to behaviors that result in suspensions. Demographic factors alone cannot explain the racial discipline gap; there is a need to examine school factors, teachers, and administrators when examining why African American students are disciplined at a higher rate than other racial groups.

Race and school context contribute to how administrators make discipline decisions. Research suggests that African American students and their families are seen as problematic and are disproportionately disciplined as a result of being of a certain race and class (A. Gregory et al., 2010; Losen, 2011; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Administrators can hold certain beliefs about race, class, misconduct, and appropriate responses to discipline. Often, administrators feel that it is their duty to enforce rules and regulations to which they feel certain groups of students are not

adhering at home. It becomes the duty of the administrator to enforce standards of behavior in a school setting to emphasize society's views of acceptable behavior for all students.

The differential selection hypothesis found that minorities are more likely to be singled out for wrongdoing than other groups, despite committing the same level of infractions (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Piquero, 2008; Rocque, 2010). African American students are more likely to be selected for disciplinary consequences (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). Differential selection in classrooms contributes to disproportionality in office referrals, which leads to suspension and expulsion (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Skiba et al. (2002) found that office referrals tend to be based on subjective versus objective reasons, based on race. More African American students are likely to be referred to the office for defiance and noncompliance (A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2008). The suspension rate for African American students increased by 12.5% between 1975 and 2010 (Bal, 2016). Disproportionality in school discipline, which leads to the discipline gap, is a nationwide problem and it seems that there is no end in sight.

Racial disproportionality in schools stems from symptoms of a larger social problem within society. In the United States, how behavior deviance is viewed in schools mirrors the way adult behaviors are disciplined (Bal, 2016; Irby, 2014; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). The students most targeted in school are from backgrounds similar to those targeted for incarceration within society (Bal, 2016; Irby, 2014; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). It seems that schools do not challenge existing orders but reproduce social hierarchies based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and academic ability (Apple, 2013). Schools are a reflection of society and the communities that they serve. Structures and rules in school have been based on middle-class social norms measured by the dominant group in American society: White males (Apple 2013;

Bal, 2016). Student behavior outside of these norms has been categorized as inappropriate and abnormal, which has led to discriminatory practices applied by those in authority.

Administrators are viewed as being partly responsible for the racial discipline gap in education. School administrators are charged with maintaining a safe learning environment that meets the needs of all students; however, the policies and practices are historically based on social norms that place African American students at risk for school failure and unfair exclusionary discipline practices (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Race has been found to be a key factor in student disciplinary decisions made by school administrators. School administrators are important participants in establishing and altering the trajectory of students' futures (DeMatthews et al., 2017). There are many studies on the role of teachers in decision making as it relates to students, but there are fewer studies about how administrators enact discipline in their schools and the impact on students of color (Findlay, 2012; Mertz & McNeely, 1998). It is important to study administrators because they are responsible for administering discipline, often based on recommendations from teachers and other school employees.

Critical race theory (CRT) has helped to examine how race plays a part in how schools operate and what occurs between students and educators (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). CRT is generally used in education to discuss teaching practices and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT has helped researchers to understand the racial discipline gap and the impact of discipline practices from the perspective of school leaders (DeMatthews, 2016). Research has shown that race and social context contribute to principals' beliefs and attitudes about race and influence their discipline approaches and decisions. CRT exposes racist ideologies that are evident in school practices. CRT can be used to conceptualize school administrators as participants that are

in a bureaucratic system where stakeholders have prejudiced ideas and rarely question power relations or the institutional system (DeMatthews et al., 2017). CRT can contribute to understanding how administrators make discipline decisions with a focus on a student's race.

The following sections address the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, the significance of the study, the nature of the study, the definition of terms, and the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Statement of the Problem

School discipline practices have come under increased scrutiny. Schools are becoming more aware of how students are disciplined and which groups of students receive harsher disciplinary consequences than others. The punitive discipline of African American students has been consistently documented. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2014) reported that African American males composed 8.23% of the population and received corporal punishment and were suspended at a rate more than three times that of the general student population. Disproportionality has become the focus of many school districts, the states, and the nation, due to the fact the exclusionary discipline of African American students continues to be a problem and has not improved over time. Historically, suspensions were imposed on African American males much more than any other group; this trend has continued (Townsend, 2000).

School administrators are at the center of maintaining discipline gaps because they make decisions that determine whether a student is suspended, expelled, or assigned to an alternative school placement (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Principals influence school culture and serve as the liaisons between districts, teachers, and students (Honig, 2004). School administrators are responsible for collecting information from teachers or other school employees, analyzing the severity of the situation, determining the consequences, and administering the punishment as

aligned with school policies and procedures. Rules are considered by school administrators to be neutral, impartially exercised, and void of feelings or personal responses (Ferguson, 2001).

School discipline decisions are assumed to be based on facts, but this has not proven to be the sole basis for discipline decisions. Most discipline decisions are based on the discretionary views and practices of school administrators. The neutral approach to decision making can be seen as a way to justify institutional norms and to be equitable in the application of disciplinary decisions.

Instead of closing the gap between racial groups, practices of school administrators have been responsible for maintaining the status quo (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Principals depend on their personal beliefs when disciplining students, which beliefs are based on their understanding of race and how it relates to their views of student misconduct.

The use of suspensions and expulsions to discipline African American students has negative impacts. One negative consequence of exclusionary discipline is the denial of access to learning when a student is not in school, which contributes to a widening achievement gap between African American students and their White peers (Townsend, 2000). When students are frequently excluded from school, their education suffers, which often causes them to be tracked in the category of lower-performing students or placed in remedial programs. Students who are excluded from school sometimes participate in illegal behavior and often drop out of school prior to graduation. When a particular student group is marginalized, this leads to feelings of disparity and rejection and students suffer from low self-esteem (Townsend, 2000).

African American students are suspended by some school administrators at a very high frequency. There are gross disparities in out-of-school suspensions experienced by African American students (Losen et al., 2015). It is no surprise that suspending students for minor offenses is not a good educational practice. It was found that lower-suspending schools had

higher student achievement rates (Skiba, 2014). There has been increased attention and a call for action on the issue of inequitable school discipline across the nation since 2011 (Losen, 2015; Losen et al., 2015). In January 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines to leaders of public schools to assist them examining their school discipline disparities. While examining discipline practices had occurred previously, this was the first federal effort to call on school leaders to take immediate action to examine discretionary discipline practices and their impact on students in general and racial groups in particular (Losen et al., 2015). The U.S. Department of Education has since been committed to examining student disproportionality in discipline as a contributing factor to the discipline gap in schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The central phenomenon is the role that administrators serve in determining disciplinary outcomes for African American students, as described by the administrators. Participants were chosen from a pool of school site administrators in a TK–12th-grade urban public school district.

The *discipline gap* is defined as the disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices applied to African American students at a much higher rate than to students of other racial groups (Skiba et al., 2011). For this reason, it is important to explore what is creating this gap in schools based on the experiences of administrators who are responsible for determining the consequences assigned to students based on infractions that take place in a school setting. In order to recognize a problem that is affecting the trajectory of African American students, it is important to study it from the perspective of those who have the power to make discipline decisions in schools.

Research Question

Administrators have a duty to maintain a positive and safe learning environment for all students. Often, administrators discipline students according to policies and practices that place African American students at risk for exclusion and not being successful in school (DeMatthews, et al., 2017). This study focused on the lived experiences of administrators in disciplining African American students and the role that they play in determining the trajectory of African American students.

Central Question

What is the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?

Subquestions

1. What are the administrators' patterns of their experiences in disciplining African American students?

2. Do the administrators' patterns of experiences demonstrate biases in the treatment of African American students that adversely affect their educational trajectory?

A research question is essential to guide a research paper because it defines what is to be studied gives the work a clear focus and purpose. Good research questions often grow out of curiosity or ideas related to a researcher's interest. Initial questions are often very generic and lead to more specific questions that help to create the focus needed to move forward with data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research questions are open ended and restate the purpose of the study, usually beginning with the words *what* and *how* (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a dissertation, the purpose of subquestions to a central research question is to refine the central question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a phenomenological research study, the subquestions

establish the essence of the study to clarify the purpose. The subquestions also serve as questions to ask during an interview or to guide an observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Significance of the Study

It is important to understand how disciplinary decisions made by administrators affect the trajectory of African American students. This research might have implications relative to researchers, school administrators, teachers, school officials, parents, and higher education scholars. This research may serve as a tool for educators to use to understand how the experiences of administrators in disciplining African American students affect the trajectory of those students.

The study may increase awareness of discipline practices and policies in the school system that affect African American students. Problems within the education system pertaining to discretionary and exclusionary disciplinary practices were explored. The study explored the factors that impact school leaders' decision making regarding minority students. These factors were presumably based on race, socioeconomic status, stereotypes, and bias perceptions that were substantiated only by perceptions.

The importance of this study was to heighten awareness of the problem of disproportionate exclusionary school discipline practices in schools experienced by African American students. The lived experiences of school administrators provide insight into the discretionary disciplinary policies and practices in the educational system. Examining the role of the school administrator as they make in-school disciplinary decisions allows exploration of the need for culturally relevant school leadership that could influence culturally relevant school discipline.

Nature of the Study

The phenomenological approach to this study was appropriate for researching the lived experiences of administrators in disciplining African American students and how these disciplinary practices affect the trajectory of African American students. This inductive research approach was used to collect information from school administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels as they participated in face-to-face semistructured or guided interviews. The participants were school site principals and assistant principals employed by an urban public school district in southern California. The administrators varied in years of experience, gender, and race.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach. Phenomenology is a 20th-century philosophical movement based on work by Edmund Husserl (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A phenomenological study sets aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences as they relate to a particular situation. The researcher is able to delve into the perspectives and feelings of people who have experienced the phenomenon under study. A phenomenological research study is usually conducted through in-depth interviews of small samples of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By studying multiple participants, the researcher begins to make generalizations about what it is like to experience a certain phenomenon from the perspective of those who have lived the experiences. The administrators who participated in this study had shared experiences related to administering student discipline in a school setting in an urban TK–12th-grade district.

The commonality among the participants was the nature of their job of either principal or assistant principal and their employment in the same school district. The participants were selected because they work in the same school district and have encountered similar experiences

in disciplining students from the community. The participants were in a setting of their choosing during collection of data. The researcher used open-ended questions to ascertain in-depth information with regard to the participants' lived experiences. Open-ended questions allowed participants to offer detailed information and the researcher asked probing questions and follow-up questions as needed to gain understanding.

Definition of Terms

The definition of terms provides an understanding of the key concepts used in research. Each term provides important information relating to the general topic being studied. It is important to define ambiguous terms or terms that are not widely known outside of the discipline. Defining key terms is essential to ensure a common understanding shared between the researcher and the audience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Achievement gap: This term is defined as any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The term is used to describe the differences in academic achievement between White students and minority students or students from higher-income families versus those from lower-income families. School disciplinary practices may be contributing to lowered academic performance in groups of students that are in the greatest need of assistance (A. Gregory et al., 2010).

Culturally relevant discipline (CRD): This concept is defined as adapting classroom practices to draw on the students' home environments and to discipline students in ways that respect and affirm students' identity rather than punish and degrade them due to cultural differences (Monroe, 2005; Monroe & Obidah, 2004). CRD emphasizes addressing students' behavior in the classroom via inclusive techniques and practices versus directing students to administrators, where they are likely to face exclusionary disciplinary practices (Monroe, 2005).

Culturally responsive school leadership: According to Khalifa (2018), culturally responsive school leadership focuses on how school leaders can effectively serve historically marginalized students and communities. Culturally responsive school leadership focuses on how leaders can engage students, parents, teachers, and communities in ways that positively affect learning by honoring indigenous heritages and local cultural practices (Khalifa, 2018). Culturally responsive school leadership is made up of specific leadership behaviors, including critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting inclusive school environments, and engaging with students' communities (Khalifa, 2018).

Discipline policies: Policies are designed to influence and determine all major decisions and actions as they relate to upholding behavior standards in schools. School discipline policies rely heavily on the exclusionary practices of suspension and expulsion (S. Hoffman, 2014). Zero tolerance discipline policies were initiated as a response to major infractions but, over the years, the application of such policies has expanded to include less severe infractions, resulting in a rise in mandatory suspensions and expulsions (S. Hoffman, 2014; Losen, 2011). There is a need to examine current discipline policies and practices that have resulted in the disproportionate removal of minority students from classrooms and schools in the United States.

Discretionary discipline: Discretionary discipline occurs when schools issue punishments for actions based on perceptions of those actions being disrespectful, dangerous, or harmful. The application of discretionary discipline practices has resulted in minority and special needs students receiving unfair disciplinary punishments at the discretion of school officials. African American students are generally not suspended for actions that would usually result in suspension or expulsion (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010). Decisions to suspend or expel

students are made at the discretion of school officials primarily in response to a violation of local school rules and not violent offenses (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010).

Disproportionality: The definition of disproportionality is overrepresentation and underrepresentation of a particular population or demographic group in an educational program or category based on their representation in the general population of students (Monroe, 2005). In the United States, African American and poor students are suspended at much higher rates than their White and more affluent peers. Minority students and special education students are disproportionately represented in disciplinary incidents, referrals, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; Fenning & Rose, 2007; A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002).

Exclusionary discipline: The term describes any type of school discipline that removes or excludes a student from their usual educational setting. The two most common exclusionary discipline practices are suspension and expulsion (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Typically used to deter unwanted behaviors in students, the practice has proven to have adverse outcomes for many students and to increase student risks for involvement in the criminal justice system (Townsend, 2000).

Racial discipline gap: The racial discipline gap occurs when students who belong to specific racial demographic groups are subjected to disciplinary actions at a greater rate than students who belong to other groups. This unfair application of disciplinary practices creates a racial discipline gap. The racial discipline gap also relates to the types of discipline applied to some student groups over other student groups for similar infractions. The Children's Defense Fund first identified racial disparities in suspension rates in 1975 (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019).

Gopalan and Nelson (2019) studied the Black-White disciplinary gap that emerged as early as Prekindergarten and widened as students advanced through the school system.

Assumptions

Creswell and Poth (2018) described philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks to aid in understanding their significance in research. An assumption is an unexamined belief of what the researcher thinks about a particular topic. Creswell and Poth (2018) described four philosophical assumptions: ontological (the nature of reality), epistemological (how researchers know what they know), axiological (the role of values in research), and methodology (the methods used in the process of research). All researchers bring philosophical assumptions to their research that guide the research and develop the work. Procedures used in qualitative research are inductive and are based on a researcher's experiences in collecting and analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interpretive frameworks are a basic set of beliefs that guide action (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this research study, the theories were rooted in social justice theories that seek to bring about change by addressing social issues in society. One of the main interpretive frameworks was CRT. When examining CRT, researchers place race and racism in the foreground of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of this study was to examine the lived experiences of school site administrators in administering discipline. The study explored the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. There was an assumption that discipline decisions made by school administrators adversely affect African American students, in particular due to the disproportionate application of harsher discipline consequences not based on the infraction but based on the race of the students.

Social constructivism also served as an interpretive framework for the topic of the lived experiences of administrators disciplining African American students and their role in determining the trajectory of African American students. The research involved asking open-ended questions and focused on the historical and cultural settings of the participants. The background of the participants helped to shape their interpretation of the phenomenon being studied. The administrators were asked to make meaning of the world in which they work by answering qualitative open-ended questions related to administering student discipline and its perceived impact on African American students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions were broad and general, which allowed for conversation and more authentic interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Three general assumptions were made pertaining to this study. The first assumption was that the participants had direct knowledge of discretionary discipline decisions made by administrators in school districts and were willing to respond to interview questions to share their experiences and views. The second assumption involved the participants' willingness to be open and honest about their experiences and not withhold information for fear of someone in their workplace finding out about their responses. The researcher assumed that the collection of the participants' informational data would be reflective of their personal experiences in the public school system working with student discipline. The third assumption was that the disciplinary practices of administrators adversely affected the educational trajectory of African American students. The information was collected from administrators in an urban public school district. The researcher had access to 54 school site administrators; 15 administrators participated in the reflective study of disciplinary practices in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Qualitative research encompasses philosophical perspectives and approaches (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenologists are interested in studying lived experiences of their everyday life and social interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The heterogeneous groups involved in the research have all experienced the phenomenon of disciplining African American students as school site administrators. Prior beliefs and experiences were set aside to focus on the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although the researcher also has some experiences related to the phenomenon, it was important that the view and experiences of the participants be interpreted, not those of the researcher. Bracketing was used by the researcher to set aside personal experiences related to the phenomenon.

Limitations

Phenomenology refers to research on how people interpret the meaning of a phenomenon or life event. Perceptions and perspectives are analyzed to understand what it is like to experience the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although phenomenological studies have many benefits, there are also limitations to this qualitative research model, including subjectivity, bias, pure bracketing, and presenting findings in a useful manner.

In a phenomenological study, interviews are the primary method of data collection. In phenomenological studies, prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions are set aside in order not to bias the study. This is called *epoche*, which means to refrain from judgment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The prejudices of the researcher must be bracketed and set aside; how well a researcher can do this is debatable. Research bias poses limitations in data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of a phenomenological study is to present the essence of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A

reader should have a better understanding of the experienced phenomenon at the conclusion of the study.

Purposeful random sampling is used in qualitative research when a researcher focuses on select individuals and sites for study because they have an understanding of the research problem and phenomenon that will be studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To reduce the limitations, a semistructured approach was used to gain consistency in the interview process. The questions were predetermined but there was flexibility during the interviews to account for information that could be added by a participant that would add to the understanding of the phenomenon.

Limitations that could not be controlled associated with this study included participants' unwillingness to volunteer, work schedules, participants changing positions during the school year, biased information, interruptions, and fear of disclosure. Fifty-four administrators in the district were asked to participate based on their job position as either a school site principal or assistant principal at the elementary, middle, or high school level. The participants represented varied years of experience, gender, and races. The participation goal for administrator interviews was 10 to 15 participants; 15 participants were interviewed. The goal of qualitative research is to interview enough participants to reach saturation. Saturation occurs when the researcher is no longer collection different information from subsequent interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In spite of the limitations associated with conducting a phenomenological study, the information presented in this study may add value to the field of education and provide useful information to administrators, teachers, parents, and educational scholars on how the lived experiences of administrators in disciplining students influence the trajectory of African American students in the educational system.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries that a researcher sets. Delimitation identifies areas that are not included in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These factors are intentional choices made by the researcher to limit the scope of the project. It is unrealistic to believe that a researcher can explore every aspect of a phenomenon, so it is important to have delimitations to narrow the focus of the research.

One of the most common delimitations in research is participant exclusion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By defining who will be included in the research, a certain population will not be included. This study focused on the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. A delimitation of the study was that the researcher did not specifically explore how administrators affect the trajectory of students of other races. The study did not include teachers, administrators from higher education, parents, or students. The focus group of administrators came from one school district. Other populations who may have had opinions about administrators and their disciplinary practices were not included.

The study did not include every administrator in the chosen district. Although 54 site administrators were invited to participate, only the first 15 participants who responded to the request to participate in the study were interviewed. Some administrators did not participate based on their unwillingness to participate, schedules, and time constraints associated with conducting face-to-face interviews. The study did not include the perspectives of other elementary, middle, and high school principals in other districts in the county, in surrounding counties, or outside the state. Also, the study was not based on the percentage of African American students at the participating administrator's school site.

The research question is a source of delimitation in a study. The study focused on the question, “What is the effect of administrators’ disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?” Therefore, the roles of parents, teachers, and other school staff members were not explored to determine how they determine the trajectory of African American students.

Participants were not interviewed more than one time. No follow-up interviews were requested by participants or the researcher. Conducting more than one interview was not feasible based on the time constraints of the participants and the researcher.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences of administrators in determining the effect of administrators’ disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The study was designed to bring attention to the discretionary discipline decisions made by administrators that affect African American students in the school system. There is a need to study this topic due to the limited research on administrators in schools and how they affect the trajectory of African American students. This study may provide information to increase awareness of unconsciously biased leaders, policies, practices, and the need for culturally responsive school leadership and culturally responsive discipline in schools.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature pertaining to the topic of the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. Topics include the following: Historical Background, Examination of School Policies, Discretion in Administrator Decision Making, Impact of Exclusionary Discipline on African American Students, and Theoretical Framework.

Historically, African American students have been disciplined more frequently and more harshly than their peers of other racial groups. The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2016) reported that, during the 2015-2016 school year, African American students were three times more likely than their White counterparts to be suspended for the same or lesser offenses committed in schools (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Black male students represented 8% nationally of enrolled students and accounted for 25% of students who received an out-of-school suspension. Black female students represented 8% nationally of the student enrollment and accounted for 14% of students who received an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). These data point to how race can play a role in the discipline decisions made by school officials. Administrators serve as the decision makers to mitigate student discipline outcomes between the district, teachers, and families. "Race is a critical variable informing student disciplinary decisions particularly for principals, who hold considerable power to alter the trajectory of students' lives" (DeMatthews et al., 2017, p. 520). Schools tend to discipline students solely on the perception of how administrators view student behavior.

The racial discipline gap has been well documented in articles and reports, leading to increased investigation of discipline policies and practices (DeMatthews et al., 2017; A. Gregory

et al., 2010; Losen, 2011, 2015; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Based on a report by Losen (2011), more than three million students were suspended at least 1 day per year in American schools in Grades K–12. School suspensions and racial disparities have grown since the 1970s. The data point to a growing racial gap in student discipline, with a national average of 1 of every 7 African American students being suspended at least 1 day in 2006 (Losen, 2011, 2015). African American students are suspended at rates three times those of White students and twice those of Hispanic and Native American students (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Finn & Servoss, 2014; Rocque, 2010; Wu et al., 1982).

Contrary to popular belief, the disproportionate number of African American students suspended from school is not due to the fact they have higher rates of misbehavior. When controlling for rankings of the types of student misbehaviors, African American students were sent out of class on discipline referrals at a higher rate (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Englehart, 2014; Finn & Servoss, 2014; Losen, 2011, 2015; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Whitford et al., 2016). The offenses tended to be in subjective categories such as showing disrespect, being disruptive, and loitering (Losen, 2011, 2015). When discipline required a judgment call based on recommendations of teachers and administrators, harsher punishments were more often applied to African American students than to students of other races (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Losen, 2011, 2015). It can be determined that African American students are being singled out by school officials at a higher rate.

Race is a critical variable in student disciplinary practices and the decisions made by principals and school administrators that can determine a student's academic trajectory (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Extensive research has studied the impact of race and how it informs teachers' decisions regarding student discipline; however, not many studies have focused on the

impact of administrators in the discipline process (Losen, 2011, 2015; Milner, 2007; Sleeter, 2001). Exclusionary discipline is related to lower academic achievement (Anderson & Ritter, 2018). In order to measure the impact of administrators on student discipline, it is necessary to explore administrators' beliefs, perceptions, and actions and to determine how they affect the racial discipline gap. Students' negative experiences in school lead to negative life experiences (Alexander, 2012; Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Irby, 2014; Losen, 2015).

The review of the literature focuses on the background of school discipline and why African American students are disproportionately disciplined in American schools in comparison to other races. Biases against African American students are examined and how these biases impact discipline decisions is examined.

The discipline gap continues to widen based on inequities in school practices; it is important to explore ways to shift injustices in schools toward justice for African American students. Administrators often follow policies and cultural norms that place African American students at a higher risk for school failure and exclusionary practices (DeMatthews, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Losen, 2015). Remedies of unfair policies and possible solutions are examined to stop this crisis that has risen to an epidemic level in schools. Leaders of social justice cannot ignore a population of students whom the educational system is failing.

Historical Background

19th-Century School Discipline (1850s–1900s)

The historical background of classroom discipline centers on assumptions, institutional practices, professional habits, and cultural perspectives in decisions made by teachers and principals (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). Historically, educational philosophy and discipline ideas were based on moral Christian standards. Missionary Samuel C. Armstrong (1839–1893)

founded Hampton University, formally known as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institution. He contended that the greater degree of a people's virtue made them more civilized. He set out to prepare African American people for success in American by increasing their degree of civilization (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). Hampton Institute was founded to instill civilized pedagogy into African American students. Armstrong, who was a mentor to African American educator Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), designed racialized disciplinary structures and pedagogies specifically for African Americans in the South after the Civil War. Armstrong argued that African Americans needed to be governed by the authority of a paternalistic, superior race (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). Armstrong claimed that traditional education was inappropriate for African Americans, insisting that they should be trained in the labor force, which would benefit the White race, and through this process African Americans would become civilized (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). This ideology laid the foundation of sacrificial racial paternalism, which established a disciplinary distance between the teacher and the student (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). The poor minority students receiving this benevolent gift of education owed a debt to White Americans who made a sacrifice to help them to become more civilized. Discipline at the turn of the century was rigid and bureaucratic, designed to establish clear authoritarian practices between races and classes.

20th-Century Progressive Discipline (1900s–1950s)

During what is known as the early progressive years, classroom management went through a period of change. A new pedagogy was formed and would remain in place until about the mid-1950s; it was known as progressive discipline and classroom management (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). The foundation of progressive discipline set the tone for punitive school discipline. According to Butchart and McEwan (1998), “Authority did not arise from moral

psychology of love and familial nurture, but from professional psychology of expertise, detachment, scientific study, and a hierarchal professional-client relationship” (p. 31). It is not to say that teachers in progressive classrooms did not care for their students; they learned to separate their feelings for children from their professional judgments regarding classroom discipline. Progressive classrooms looked different. Students were involved in movement, self-direction, and learning-by-doing (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). Educators in a progressive classroom wanted to develop better learners and more effective classroom control. The belief focused on the idea that, if students were more focused in the classroom, they would behave better. Teachers needed to focus not only on instruction but on lighting in the classroom, seating, and other factors that could contribute to student misbehavior. It was agreed that rebellious student behavior could be controlled with the right techniques (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). During this time period, there was an expansion of school administration, which meant more monitoring of teachers and their classroom management techniques.

Progressive education introduced standardized testing, ability grouping, and differentiated curriculum. With ability grouping, the practice that also came into play was often grouping by class and race. Sifting and sorting in American classrooms undoubtedly led to classroom discipline problems. Standardized tests and differentiated curricula were used to track students as a form of discipline. Disciplinary structures that were introduced in the 19th century and were standardized in the 20th century included report cards and promotion and retention (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). Other practices introduced to exert disciplinary authority were extracurricular requirements and compulsory attendance laws. Each new policy added bureaucratic layers between administrators, teachers, and students, which increased disciplinary problems associated with failure to follow established norms set by the school system. Butchart

and McEwan (1998) stated, “Discipline was removed from the contested arena of ethics and politics to the sanitized laboratory of technique and science” (p. 38). This practice took away the personal relationship between teachers and students and shifted the focus to rules and regimentation to determine appropriate student behavior.

Discipline in Schools (1950s to Present)

Since the 1950s, there has been a movement away from the social objective of school discipline to a focus on control over students’ behaviors (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). The goal has shifted to short-term classroom order to philosophies addressing student discipline. Most discipline models focus on behaviorism techniques of rewards and consequences based on an authoritarian model (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). Both the constructivist and behaviorist approaches assert the authority of teachers over students. The current consumer society banishes impulse in order to manipulate the ideas of the consumer and discourage individualism (Butchart & McEwan, 1998).

The past 2 centuries of disciplinary power over students have dramatically reduced the potential relationships between teachers and students to a battle of power and control in which the student has no chance at winning (Davis & Jordan, 1994). High priority is placed on a student’s understanding of what their role is within a school’s organization. How well a student succeeds depends on whether they know the rules of the school and are able to apply the rules within the system. Organizational goals such as completing assignments, behaving, and maintaining school equipment are valued over relational goals such as making friends and learning how to solve problems. Students must learn to value the organization above their own sense of self (Butchart & McEwan, 1998).

The disciplinary values of schooling have taken the greatest toll on students of color, particularly African American students. The White middle-class values of strict organization, completion of a task, independent work, and a focus on producing products that reflect a lack of creativity has stifled African American students (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Self-expression is not valued and multiple ways of demonstrating intelligence are not often considered in today's classrooms. Delpit (2006) described middle-class values in education as a way to maintain the status quo of power to ensure that it remains with those who already have it. Teachers often deprive African American students of the cultural codes that they need to be successful in school; they unfairly discipline students when these codes are broken instead of valuing the students' background and teaching them how to navigate the complexities of the organization of school (Cross et al., 1989; Delpit, 2006).

Examination of School Policies

When discussing the historical philosophies and practices relating to school discipline, the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 set the path toward equalizing opportunities for all students in American schools (Losen, 2015). More than 60 years after *Brown*, there is evidence that inequities in the educational system have become greater and that unfair discipline policies and practices are controlled by teachers and administrators (Losen, 2015). Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 guaranteed the right not to be discriminated against based on race, color, or national origin (Skiba et al., 2011). In 2004, these protections were extended to students with disabilities in the form of the Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and later to guarantee equitable educational results for students in the Elementary and Secondary Act: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2008 (Skiba et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2012). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was reauthorized and took the place of

NCLB. ESSA gave more control over education and accountability for students to the states (Donnor et al., 2018).

Although laws were passed to guarantee rights for all students, there are continued racial disparities in education, including the achievement gap, disproportional representation in special education, dropout and graduation rates, and exclusionary discipline practices in particular experienced by African American students. Research during the past 25 years has documented racial disparities in the application of corporal punishment, office referrals, school suspensions, and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). The U.S. Department of Education reported an increase in the exclusionary discipline of African American students since the 1970s (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2011). There are racial disparities in discipline practices in American schools (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). The discipline disparities are problematic because they contribute to the racial achievement gap (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2011; Townsend, 2000).

There are distinctions between appropriate disciplinary consequences and harsh or overly punitive punishments that reflect misuse of power and contribute to the racial discipline gap (Irby, 2014). Current school discipline policies and practices perpetuate the problems. Harsh punishment for minor disciplinary infractions is often a result of patterns of racial discrimination that have been historically embedded into school practices (DeMatthews et al, 2017). Discipline techniques applied to African American students account for more than 25% of the variability in exclusionary discipline rates (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). This disparity has led to a gap in discipline between African American students and students of other ethnic groups. Literature since the 1960s has documented how African American students have been suspended from school and received discipline referrals three times more often than White students (Brown &

Di Tillio, 2013; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Finn & Servoss, 2014; M. Hoffman, 2012; Rocque, 2010; Wu et al., 1982).

Fenning and Rose (2007) focused on more than 30 years of research pointing to the overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline practices in American schools. Discipline rates were based more on school factors than on challenging behaviors of students (Losen, 2011; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). African American students are not more likely to misbehave in school than their White or Asian peers, but they are more likely to receive harsher disciplinary consequences (Fenning & Rose, 2007; A. Gregory et al., 2010; Losen, 2011, 2015). For administrators, certain types of discipline involve limited discretionary decision making. If a student possesses drugs or alcohol, there is usually no room for subjective judgment. Dealing with insubordination, threats, and in some instances fighting calls for principals to exercise their personal judgment, which often differs based on the race of the student or students involved in the incident (Donnor et al., 2018).

Harper et al. (2009) outlined an examination of policies affecting African American students and a lack of sustained advancements in education. The researchers wrote that no advancements were made in closing the discipline gap based on implemented policies. “We juxtapose historically noteworthy progressive steps toward access and equity with recent indicators of backward movement” (p. 390). A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) noted that in examining the achievement gap, there is still no understanding of the gap in the context of race and how race influences discipline in schools. They asked, “How do urban teachers’ various theories of why students are involved in the school’s discipline system relate to differences in race and culture?” (p. 20). Rocque (2010) posed a similar purpose for exploration and examined racial disparities in school discipline using data collected from 45 elementary schools. The

researcher looked at office referrals and reported, as it relates to disciplinary actions taken by educators, American students are disproportionately referred to the office. Nelson (2008) noted that school policies are biased and make matters worse in school and society. Biased systems lead to bias in schools and unfair disciplinary practices.

A current policy that contributes to disproportionate disciplinary actions against African American students is the zero tolerance policy. The policy was put in place by U.S. schools to reduce violent activity in schools related to weapons and drugs. It was designed to be a prevention program; however, schools have focused on the punitive aspect and have failed to implement prevention programs (S. Hoffman, 2014; Nelson, 2008; Simson, 2014). Casella (2003, as cited in Nelson, 2008) found that zero tolerance policies punished those who needed the most help: poor, underserved, underachieving students from poor, violent homes and neighborhoods. This policy is also applied more often to minority students who commit the same or similar offenses as their peers (S. Hoffman, 2014; Honig, 2004; Nelson, 2008). Schools are being asked to reevaluate the practice of zero tolerance and how it is overapplied to African American students.

Instructional time received is a predictor of student outcomes. Thus, the loss of instructional time related to out-of-school suspension can impede the academic progress of students (Simson, 2014). Excessive punishments impede learning development, as well as the student's ability to form healthy relationships. Students who are suspended for long lengths of time have little to no access to alternative education. Punitive policies such as zero tolerance can be counterproductive. Schools that have higher rates of suspension and expulsion have poorer outcomes on standardized tests, regardless of socioeconomic demographics (Barnhart et al., 2008; Simson, 2014).

Governor Jerry Brown's signing of AB 420 in California was the first law of its kind to eliminate suspension of younger students for certain offenses and elimination of expulsion for nonviolent school offenses such as defiance (Englehart, 2014). The bill, signed in 2014, was a positive move against harsh discipline practices and a step toward restorative justice for students in public schools. Making it more difficult for administrators to suspend for infractions based on judgment calls is a step in the right direction for African American students.

As referenced throughout the literature, African Americans students are most often disciplined for infractions based on defiance. There have been new agreements between school policing agencies and school districts to limit the filing of criminal charges and citations (known as clean sweep offenses) against students for minor infractions. Instead, students will be referred to counseling and other support services (Armour, 2015). Schools must now look at restorative justice practices that call for alternative ways to deal with discipline so students can remain in school (Armour, 2015; S. Hoffman, 2014). Such programs include Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), Safe Response Schools (SRS), and Behavioral Monitor and Reinforcement Programs (Butler et al., 2012). Exclusionary discipline does not benefit African American students; a focus on social justice practices in schools is needed to change discipline practices from punitive to restorative.

Discretion in Administrator Decision Making

Administrators, particularly principals, contribute to the discipline gap as they make determinations about suspensions, expulsions, and other student placements (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Honig, 2004). Administrators collect information from teachers and determine the course of action for student misconduct based on policy. The administrator makes these determinations

based on perceptions, order, rules, and respect for maintaining the system of school (Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Findlay, 2015). In theory, they should base decisions on rational, neutral facts.

One of the main challenges that administrators face in dealing with students is the application of broad principles and facts that dictate the outcome of discipline decisions (Findlay, 2015). Thus, almost every decision made in administration contains a measure of discretion (Findlay, 2012, 2015). Meyer et al. (2009) found that principals incorporate conscience and discretion in their decision making. Research has shown that principals govern by attending to matters in episodic intervals that glean less than 4 minutes of their attention while they deal with almost 400 separate daily interactions (Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1980; Findlay, 2012; Manasse, 1985; Mertz & McNeeley, 1998). Gronn (2003) described the work of the administrator as filled with long hours, demands, and an unreasonable pace filled with frustrations. Administrators make quick decisions while dealing with other pressing situations (Findlay, 2012, 2015). Administrative perceptions have been shown to alter discriminatory discipline (Whitford et al., 2016). Variations in principal attitudes have been shown to have a greater influence on discipline administered to students than student behavioral characteristics (Brown & Di Tillo, 2013; A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Administrators who thought exclusionary discipline was good had more exclusionary discipline practices and disproportionality based on race (Skiba et al., 2002).

Impact of Exclusionary Discipline on African American Students

The effects of exclusionary discipline on African American students were reviewed in the literature. One of the most obvious impacts is the denial of access to learning opportunities when students are not in school. A widening achievement gap is correlated with the disproportionate discipline of African American students (Townsend, 2000). Students who do not feel supported by teachers are more likely to engage in disruptive behavior (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). In a study

by Barnhart et al. (2008), school staff were unaware of the rate at which African American students were being suspended from school, believing that out-of-school suspensions were used infrequently. Because staff members are unaware of the negative impact of exclusionary discipline on African American students, culturally relevant teaching is important for use in the classroom to reduce student discipline and improve student achievement. According to Walker-Dalhouse (2005), “Culturally relevant teachings that are especially important for discipline include judicious use of authority in the classroom, viewing students as extended family members, and changing one’s perceptions about student achievement” (p. 27). A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) organized the literature beginning with a historical perspective on the achievement gap and reported a correlation between the achievement gap and the discipline gap. The literature supports how disciplinary decisions are made based on an analysis of racial interpretations. Literature has documented racial disparities as a cause of discriminatory practices.

The reviewed literature clearly shows that African American students are disciplined, suspended, and expelled at a higher rate than any other group of students (DeMatthews, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Findlay, 2012, 2015; Gay, 2006; Gordon et al., 2000; Kupchick & Ellis, 2008; Losen, 2015; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). It also shows that discipline was not administered because many African American students were disciplined for infractions that were ignored or dealt with less harshly for other students (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Shaw & Braden, 1990; Shirley & Cornell, 2012).

DeMatthews (2016) explored applying CRT to a racist school context. The author stated, “Current and future school leaders must develop the analytic tools to critically question the role of schools and organizational structures that maintain racism and White dominance” (p. 91).

Parker (2002, as cited in DeMatthews, 2016) called for a challenge of colorblind interpretations of policies and practices to get at the real core of the problem. Change starts with school leaders being reflective of their own racial background.

Butler et al. (2012) offered many specific recommendations to aid in the reduction of disproportionate discipline practices in schools. First, it was recommended reaffirm school district efforts to understand the complexities of school discipline practices. Schools need to continue to receive support from their districts so they have access to data, funding, and staff development for teachers and staff members related to exclusionary discipline practices. Second, it was recommended to establish internal protocols/mechanisms and conduct equity audits in schools to evaluate student discipline cases and remove biases that inhibit standardization of policies and practices (Findlay, 2012). This would aid in reporting and tracking discipline trends. Recommendations can be made by adults for interventions. An advisory team is important to reduce individual biases in decision making when dealing with student discipline. Third, it was recommended to conduct regular independent evaluations of alignment between exclusionary sanctions and subjectively defined offenses. Schools should review policies and discipline matrices frequently to ensure that minor infractions are handled appropriately and do not lead to harsher punishments, such as suspension or expulsion. Fourth, it was recommended to engage administrators and teachers in staff development that helps them to resolve conflicts by using de-escalation and coping strategies (Findlay, 2012). Counselors and social workers can offer professional development for teachers and administrators in techniques of de-escalation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This would help staff members to improve relationships with students and would lead to fewer discipline referrals and harsher punishments. Fifth, it was recommended to identify best practices that break the cycle of misbehavior in students. Community-based and school-

based programs that operate on school campuses can serve students who are struggling by reinforcing necessary behavior skills. These programs also offer positive means of self-expression (Khalifa, 2018). Sixth, it was recommended to explore the relationships among gender, school level, behavior, and exclusionary sanctions. Schools should establish strategies and programs that benefit African American students (males and females) and instructional interests. Specialized programming can provide opportunities to address the unique needs of student groups versus a homogeneous approach (Butler et al., 2012).

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

Historians point to a critical analysis of race in society to answer questions about the lack of equity and access. CRT provides a lens through which to examine how race has affected every aspect of life for African Americans and the social injustices that have been encountered throughout history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Donner et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). It further examines how the historical inequities affect current policies related to African Americans regarding social issues, including education.

Harper et al. (2009) examined the seven tenets of the CRT. Although the authors focused on application of CRT to students in higher education, the tenets of the theory are applicable in all aspects of education and the political system. First, racism is a normal part of life in America. Second, colorblindness does not address inequality and disadvantages faced by African Americans by ignoring race. Third, CRT challenges assumptions about race and places race from a realistic perspective. Fourth, CRT recognizes the power structure of a system that enacts policy changes for African Americans that ultimately benefit the White majority (known as the process of interest convergence). Fifth, CRT calls for a careful examination of historical facts for value

and truth. Historical events and facts that affect the true perspective of the discriminated population should not be replaced by fictional accounts. Sixth, CRT recognizes racial realism, or what Delgado and Stefancic (2017) referred to as the realization that racism is the way in which society allocates privilege and status. There is a hierarchy in the system that determines who is at the top and who is at the bottom. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) pointed to slavery as the beginning of prejudice and discrimination. Seventh, CRT is critical of meritocracy due to three central beliefs that must constantly be challenged: (a) colorblindness eliminates racism, (b) racism is not sustained by the system but by people, and (c) racism and all other injustices can be fought in isolation. Harper et al. (2009) stated that “racial subordination is among the critical factors responsible for the continued production of racialized disparities and opportunity gaps” (p. 392).

Rooted in CRT are exclusionary discipline practices contributing to the discipline gap in schools. As outlined in the first two tenets CRT, racism is a part of American life and teachers and administrators often seek to be color blind versus color conscious. Educators avoid race and acknowledging their own prejudices, which leads to uncomfortable interactions between staff and students (Taylor et al., 2016). The lack of culturally responsive educators has led to a disconnect between teachers, administrators, and students in the school system because there is a limited voice for students of color (Taylor et al., 2016). The third tenet of the CRT examines the fact that, because the experiences of African Americans are not validated within mainstream culture, it is difficult to eradicate racism (Harper et al., 2009). Teachers and administrators make decisions to refer students to the office and suspend students for minor offenses because there is a lack of cultural understanding and relationships between school officials and the students whom they serve. “Many African American students who are suspended believe they have poor

relationships with their teachers” (Garibaldi, 1992, as cited in Townsend, 2000, p. 387).

Educators must make connections with students in order to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline to change the behavior of African American students. Harsh punishment does not change behavior; relationships and cultural understanding lead to change (Khalifa, 2018).

Classroom exchanges between students and classroom teachers that lead to students being excluded from the classroom seem to be rooted in fear (Fenning & Rose, 2007). There has been little advancement in race relations because policies and laws throughout history have been implemented only when they have benefited the White mainstream culture, as described in the fourth CRT tenet (Harper et al., 2009). The fifth tenet of CRT calls this belief revisionist history, which facts are replaced with fictional historical events (Harper et al., 2009).

Policies will not be effective if the attitudes of some educators toward African American students remain adversarial. Educators must be more racial realists, which will allow them to recognize that in America race is used to allocate privilege and status and to determine who receives benefits (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The sixth tenet of CRT is defined by Bell (2005), who noted that, although race is a permanent part of American life, society is still working to create a set of strategic approaches for improving the plight of historically excluded groups. The seventh tenet of CRT seven challenges the idea that a system of meritocracy can eliminate racism (Harper et al., 2009). It is known that both school and family factors affect student achievement; it is important to work for positive change. One cannot be successful without the other.

Also, educators cannot stand against racism in schools without paying attention to other forms of oppression such as sexism, homophobia, and economic status (Harper et al., 2009). Contributing to student success is a student’s perception of being respected and supported by a

teacher and administrator in a safe learning environment (Skiba et al., 2011). In the absence of such a relationship, no significant learning or change in behavior will occur (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The many cultural misunderstandings that arise among teachers, administrators and students lead to overrepresentation of African American students being disciplined for subjective offenses such as disrespect (Fenning & Rose, 2007). CRT provides the framework to address disparities in society and in the school system by embedding culturally responsive pedagogy to remedy the disconnect that exists in schools (Dixson et al., 2006). Courageous conversations about race and how it influences all aspects of lives can lead to understanding and educating all students.

The historical issues facing students in education are the impact of race on the disproportionality of discipline in schools and why teachers and school officials are unable or unwilling to address the biases that contribute to these practices (Fisher et al., 1981; Gay, 2002, 2006; Kalifa et al., 2016). Exclusionary discipline practices lead to a widening discipline gap and lack of student success in schools.

The over-application of school discipline for minor infractions is creating a perception of social control that contributes to a system of inequity and lack of access. Increased exclusionary practices have not improved societal concerns affecting youths' or students' academic achievement. Exclusionary discipline has reaffirmed the injustices outlined in CRT that race is used unfairly to keep a system of racism in place (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Kupchik and Ellis (2008) found in their study of school discipline and fairness that school disciplinary practices promote very little change but actually mirror existing injustices in the larger society. The authors referred to this as the reproduction theory by which school discipline practices

reproduce inequities. “We had speculated that African American students might receive a different style of discipline than White students, whereby stereotypes of African American youth as more violent or more in need of control than White students would shape school practices” (p. 567).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Culturally responsive school leadership stems from ideologies that respond to diverse school populations (Vassallo, 2015). Many school leaders do not recognize how culture influences a student’s performance and behavior in school. School culture combines the beliefs of students, teachers, and school administrators and the meaning shapes the behavior and how people think and act (Vassallo, 2015). All stakeholders in schools come with predispositions and biases and each member must make an effort to set aside prejudices and construct a new learning paradigm (Gay, 2002, 2006; Khalifa, 2018; Terrell et al., 2018; Vassallo, 2015). Cross et al. (1989) referred to cultural proficiency as an inside-out process of personal and organizational change. Leaders must engage in becoming reflective of their prejudices, biases, and assumptions and learn to develop new knowledge (Gay, 2002, 2006; Khalifa, 2018; Terrell et al., 2018; Vassallo, 2015).

Gay (2002) brought to light the importance of culturally responsive teaching but she made the point that all aspects of education should be reformed to make a difference in the education of students. Gay suggested that, if teachers should examine their practices in the classroom, then leaders should definitely do the same. Education reformers claim that school leadership is critical to school reform, second only to teaching in the classroom (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive school leaders promote a school climate that meets the needs of students, parents, and teachers within their cultural context (Theoharis, 2009). Culturally

responsive leaders develop a welcoming school that is accepting of minority students (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). School leaders share in a moral responsibility to ensure that disenfranchised minority students can learn in an environment that is free from oppression.

When schools are disconnected from the communities that they serve, there is an increase in exclusionary practices that further widen the discipline and academic gaps for minority students (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2009; Welsh et al., 1999). School leaders must create an environment that incorporates the values of the community (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2009). School leaders may hide behind neutrality when they do not wish to address community concerns. Khalifa (2018) stated that school leadership is expressed in four ways: critical self-reflection, curriculum and instruction, school context and climate, and community engagement. School leaders are in the position to bring about culturally responsive behaviors in their schools.

Culturally Relevant Discipline

A. Gregory and Mosley (2004) applied five theoretical frameworks to develop their research on culturally responsive discipline. The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy usually refers to instruction; for this purpose, it was applied to the area of discipline. The authors sought to expand culturally relevant pedagogy to gain an understanding of conflicts and discipline in a school setting. The low achievement theory was explored, focused on how students cope with academic failure and the community. Cultural deficit theory focused on the differing culture that African American students bring to schools, potentially leading to problems. Overall, teachers in the study attributed a student's lack of success to poverty and home issues that students face in the community, which dismissed responsibility for student achievement and discipline from the educator. A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) stated, "In fact, a focus on a particular racial group and

their socioeconomic conditions quickly short-circuit any attempts to make school-based changes” (p. 23).

Skiba et al. (2011) found race and socioeconomic status to be highly connected to racial disparities in school discipline practices. The theory of CRD looks at school discipline and how school, community, and society contribute to discipline problems (A. Gregory & Mosley, 2004; Gay, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2004). Rocque (2010) explored the theories of racial threats and labeling. When a dominant culture is threatened by another culture, the group begins to exert more control and the controlled group is seen as being more deviant in behavior (Rocque, 2010). Thus, a student’s background influences the teacher’s perceptions.

Research reveals that African American students receive reprimands and more punitive consequences even when students of other races exhibit the same behaviors (Monroe, 2005; Monroe & Obidah, 2004). Noltemeyer et al. (2012) reported that minority students were often removed from class by teachers and suspended by administrators for moderate, nonviolent, and nonthreatening offenses.

Students need to feel physically and emotionally safe before they can focus on participating actively in learning (Gay, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Today, many teachers and school administrators are challenged to meet the unique social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. As demographics have changed, educators have struggled to address the behavioral and social needs of the diverse population of students whom they serve (Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Khalifa, 2018). Approaches to school discipline have traditionally been punitive. Punitive discipline has proven to be ineffective and does little to change behavior. Creating and sustaining safe and orderly learning environments where students are empowered to share their opinions and perspectives should be the goal of school administrators.

Punishing problem behaviors can be associated with increased aggression, vandalism, truancy, and dropout rates. Many schools have initiated approaches to developing positive social and academic behaviors to avoid exclusionary discipline that negatively affects academic learning (Theoharis, 2009). A commonly used framework is PBIS, which attempts to improve behavior and academic outcomes. It is important to consider how culture influences social and emotional responses and influences behavioral expectations placed on students by adults in schools (A. Gregory & Mosley, 2004; A. Gregory et al., 2010; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). Cultural and linguistic differences must be considered in proactive and culturally responsive discipline approaches so that student engagement and communication patterns are co-constructed with students and families (King et al., 2006).

When significant differences exist between school and community cultures, school administrators can misinterpret students' behavior as disobedient, disrespectful, disorderly, or defiant (Khalifa, 2018; Kalifa et al., 2016). Schools and other communities define social norms of acceptable behavior, potentially placing students in the position of negotiating new identities that signal membership (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Studies have shown that students of color are referred for disciplinary actions most often for subjective behaviors such as disrespect, excessive noise, or loitering, while White students are most often referred for infractions such as smoking or obscene language—behaviors that do not rely on subjective interpretation (Rocque, 2010; Skiba, 2014; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2011). School administrators must build awareness of their own cultural beliefs and values in order to recognize how their expectations for student behavior are influenced by their perceptions, thoughts, and actions (White et al., 2005). Cultural differences influence how behaviors are interpreted by adults in

school; students and parents are often unaware of the hidden codes in schools that may leave students of color, in particular African American students, at a disadvantage.

The power of making discipline judgments rests with school administrators.

Administrators who may not understand or be conscious of the relational nature of their cultural differences will create a school where behavioral issues are the center of conflict among and between students, families, and other school personnel (Findlay, 2012, 2015; A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Where cultural differences exist but are not adequately considered, the conflict will exist instead of considering new cultural norms that lead to cooperation.

Chapter Summary

School leaders must continue to address the deeper issues in schools to facilitate the discussion of race and its impact on student discipline. Data have shown exclusionary discipline practices for more than 50 years in education. School leaders must challenge the systems that maintain racism within schools. If teachers, administrators, and staff members are not exposed to the reflective practices of examining their own biases, African American students will continue to be marginalized.

The practice of social justice leadership is an awareness and recognition of inequitable circumstances of marginalized groups and being proactive in eliminating injustices (DeMatthews, 2016). CRT provides a framework to examine inequities in schools based on race. It is not enough to desire change in schools. Leaders of social justice must possess the skills to bring about change. Social justice leaders apply an equity lens in every aspect of their duties, including budgeting, evaluating teachers, disciplining students, involving parents, and making decisions concerning curriculum. Culturally responsive school leadership will lead to culturally relevant classroom discipline, including following: (a) recognizing one's biases, (b) increasing

the knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, (c) determining how to interpret and respond to student behavior, (d) learning culturally appropriate strategies to respond to student misbehavior, (e) committing to creating a caring classroom in which students can learn and grow (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Walker-Dalhouse, 2005). Only with an understanding of different cultures and perspectives will there be a change in the disproportionately applied discipline in schools toward African American students that affects their life trajectory.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This research study focused on the lived experiences of administrators and the effect of the administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The study is important because there is limited literature and research on administrators' perspectives and experiences regarding their disciplinary practices that significantly contribute to the educational trajectory of African American students. Administrators are responsible to collect information from teachers and school personnel and determine appropriate actions to correct inappropriate student behavior. The decisions are based on a level of discretion and not always on rational or neutral facts. There is a widening achievement gap correlated with the disproportionate discipline of African American students (Townsend, 2000).

A qualitative phenomenological study was determined to be the most effective way to examine the lived experiences of administrators to gather their perspectives related to their role in student discipline. This chapter provides an overview of the research approach and methodology used in this study. Sections are titled Research Question, Research Method and Design, Appropriateness of Phenomenon Theory Design, District Selection and Description, Participants, Gatekeeper Consideration, Confidentiality Instrumentation, Data Collection, Data Collection Approaches, Ethical Issues, Data Analysis, Limitations of the Research Design, Role of the Researcher, Validity and Reliability, and Informed Consent.

Research Question

Central Question

What is the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?

Subquestions

1. What are the administrators' patterns of their experiences in disciplining African American students?
2. Do the administrators' patterns of experiences demonstrate biases in the treatment of African American students that adversely affect their educational trajectory?

Research Method and Design

All research investigates something in a systematic manner. Qualitative research is exploratory research. It is conducted to gain an understanding of reasons, opinions, and motivations. Qualitative research is used to uncover trends in thoughts and opinions and to explore deep problems (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research uses an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative data collection methods are unstructured or semistructured techniques such as focus groups, interviews, and participant observation. The sample size in qualitative research is typically small and respondents are selected based on their involvement in and knowledge of the subject area (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All qualitative research focuses on how people construct meaning based on their lives and the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal of qualitative research is to uncover and interpret meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research focusing on experience and how experiencing something is translated into consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). van Manen (2014) described phenomenology as the way to access the world as it is experienced reflectively. According to van Manen (2014), "Prereflective experience is the ordinary experience that we live in and that we live through for most, if not all, of our day-to-day existence" (p. 28). In this study, a phenomenological study design was used to gain an understanding of how

administrators make discipline decisions that determine the trajectory of African American students based on the administrators' discipline policies and practices. The aim of the study was to understand how disciplinary decisions made by administrators affect students in their school careers. The researcher explored how discipline inequities and inconsistencies are applied to African American students more than to other groups of students. In a phenomenological study, the phenomenon to be explored is phrased in terms of a single concept or idea (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was an exploration of the concept of administrators' discipline decision making and its impact on African American students.

The task of a phenomenological researcher is to set aside previously held beliefs so that they do not interfere with seeing the structure of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is also known as bracketing. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "When belief is temporarily suspended, consciousness itself becomes heightened and can be examined in the same way that an object of consciousness can be examined" (p. 26). The goal of phenomenology is to present a new perspective through the lived experiences of the participants and not the researcher's experiences. van Manen (2014) described this approach to phenomenological research as hermeneutical phenomenology. Research is oriented toward a lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreted in the texts of life (van Manen, 2014). It is a study of concern that is of serious interest to the researcher. The focus is on themes that make up the lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) described this as transcendental phenomenology, which is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of the participants. Like van Manen (2014), Moustakas (1994) focused on the concept of bracketing used to set aside the researcher's experiences to focus on the ideas of the participants.

The phenomenological research study focuses on understanding individuals' lived incidents through unbiased broad dialogue and interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of qualitative research is to describe, understand, and interpret human phenomena, human interaction, or human discourse. According to Finlay (2011), "Unlike other research approaches phenomenology does not categorize or explain behavior nor does it generate theory. It seeks solely to do justice to everyday experience, to evoke what it means to be human" (p. 3).

In gathering accounts from participants relating to administrators' decisions that determine the trajectory of African American students, the researcher applied the epoche process. The epoche process is the suspension of one's perceptions through clearing the mind and allowing the formation of the phenomenon to come from the research participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), "The challenge of epoche is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner" (p. 86).

Ontology

Ontology refers to one's worldview and its effects on the way one sees and understand the world. Qualitative research is based on the belief that people gain knowledge from an activity, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is the opposite of quantitative research, which is based on the belief that knowledge already exists and is waiting to be uncovered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ontology is a philosophical idea that is focused on the nature of things and what currently exists. Knowledge of education leads the researcher to select this methodology because of lived experiences as a school site administrator. Ontology helps researchers to identify how certain they can be about the existence of what they are researching. Ontology is the study of being that centers on what exists in the world from which one can

acquire knowledge. This type of study is an exploration of what participants bring to the research based on their personal history, their views of themselves and others, and ethical issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A qualitative researcher understands that a topic can be seen in many ways. It is the duty of the researcher to report various perspectives as themes emerge in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative researcher realizes that there are many realities related to a single topic. Evidence of themes that may support a different perspective is also reported. The final qualitative report shows how study participants can view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994)

Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Epistemology influences how researchers develop their research in the attempt to discover knowledge. Looking at the relationship between a subject and an object shows how epistemology influences research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Constructivist epistemology prescribes to the philosophy that truth and meaning come from engagement with the realities that exist in the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The value of constructivist research generates an understanding of a defined topic or problem in context. The goal of the research relies on how a participant views a situation. A broad research question allows the researcher to construct meaning from a situation based on social interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a phenomenological study, individuals describe their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The various experiences of participants showed how different administrators in this study viewed discipline practices and how these practices affected African American students.

Social constructivism is suitable for the study of the role of administrators in determining the trajectory of African American students based on the administrators' discipline policies and practices. The participants in this study had personal views that sometimes differed and sometimes were similar. Although they were administrators in the same district, how each viewed personal experiences varied in nature and contributed to the uniqueness of the study.

Appropriateness of Phenomenon Theory Design

The research design was chosen based on the problem statement and the research questions. When there is limited information or inconsistencies in the literature, a qualitative approach is the appropriate research design. There is limited literature focusing on the research question presented in this study.

An appropriate methodology and design helped to choose the appropriate instruments to collect data. The qualitative phenomenological research methodology was appropriate for studying the role of administrators in determining the trajectory of African American students based on the administrators' discipline policies and practices. The methodology allowed for the study of human behavior and experiences. Human science research allows for understanding the phenomenon and the consequences of its application.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American student based on the administrators' discipline decisions. The qualitative research method was preferred to explore and find specific knowledge of the participants' perceptions and to make a thorough interpretation of collected data that could be analyzed inductively (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

District Selection and Description

The school district in which the study was conducted is a mid-sized urban school district in southern California. The enrollment of the school district is approximately 25,500 students in Grades TK to 12. The ethnic make-up of the students in the district is as follows: Latino 84%, African American 10%, White 4%, and other 3%. The African American student population represents approximately 2,550 students in the district. The district is a Title I district with 80% of the students identified as coming from a low socioeconomic background (receiving free or reduced-price lunches). The district has 54 school site administrators who perform administrative duties in the role of principal or assistant principal at the elementary (TK through Grade 5), middle (Grades 6 through 8), and high school (Grades 9 through 12).

Participants

The participants in the study were 15 school site administrators who served at the elementary, middle, or high school levels. The administrators held the position of either school site principal or school site assistant principal. The study examined the lived experiences of the administrators and the effect of their disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students.

The research size was determined based on the chosen research method. When conducting qualitative research, the sample size is smaller than that used in quantitative research. The selection of the sample size is an example of criterion sampling. The individuals used in the sampling have knowledge of the phenomenon and experience with the topic being researched. The selected individuals were chosen because they could inform an understanding of the research problem and the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher can go more in-depth with a smaller sample size. Quantitative research is based primarily on random sampling and qualitative research focuses on a specific sample. The sampling strategy used in this study was criterion sampling. Criterion sampling is frequently used in qualitative studies. Criterion sampling looks for cases that meet the specific criteria of importance, which is useful for quality assurance (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The sample population for this study involved administrators who work in the public school system and make discipline decisions. The goal was to include persons with knowledge of educational practices as they relate to discipline in order to study the unique occurrences, incidents, or events of the research topic. The sampling included administrators who worked in the same urban public school district and made discipline decisions that affect students on a daily basis. These administrators work with a population of students that includes African American students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The demographics of the participants included African American, White, and Hispanic/Latino administrators. All participants possessed at least a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, a teaching credential, a credential in administration, and at least 3 years of administrative experience in a public school setting, either as an assistant principal or principal or both. Some participants held a doctorate in education. Recruitment of participants was based on the first 15 administrators to respond to the request to participate. The researcher invited the administrators who met the criteria to participate in the study. Recruitment letters were emailed and one telephone call was made personally to prospective participants who did not respond to the recruitment letter.

Gatekeeper Consideration

A letter was sent to the district superintendent's office with a copy to the Educational Services Department requesting permission to conduct research in the district (Appendix A). The superintendent wrote a letter of approval for the study to be conducted in the school district (Appendix B). The school district's approval was received and the University of Redlands Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted (Appendix C). The district school site administrators were sent a personal introductory letter via email and a follow-up telephone call was made to answer questions regarding the study by prospective participants who did not respond to the introductory letter (Appendix D). The first 15 administrators who agreed to participate were given an informed consent form (Appendix E) that was explained to them. The interview protocol (Appendix F) was reviewed prior to the interviews with participants.

An interview is considered to be a social interaction based on a conversation. Knowledge is constructed from the exchange that occurs between the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were exposed to minimal risks during the study. There was a time limit set for the interview (not to exceed 60 minutes) and a predetermined number of six interview questions to fit within the interview time limit. The interview participants were read an interview protocol prior to the interview taking place. The interview took place in a location that was comfortable for the participant without distractions and interruptions. After the interviews were completed, a debriefing form (Appendix G) was reviewed with each participant; it contained further information about the research topic and contact information for follow-up questions.

The participants were asked open-ended questions; their responses were recorded for accuracy and validity. The interviews were conducted in a semistructured style. During a

semistructured interview, the question is flexibly worded but there is a structured section to the interview. A semistructured interview allows responses to the situation at hand if new ideas emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Answers were listened to in order to capture experiences, perceptions, and philosophies of the administrators who make discipline decisions and policies that affect the trajectory of African American students.

There was good rapport between interviewer and respondents. The researcher was respectful and nonjudgmental and put the respondents at ease when answering questions. The process remained courteous, responsive, and respectful at all times throughout the interviews. By recording the interviews, the researcher was able to be an active listener during the interviews. Participants were allowed to express themselves and have their responses recorded to protect the authenticity of their ideas and voice.

Confidentiality

The term *participant* is used by the qualitative researcher to describe persons who are being studied and have expressed willingness to participate in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participating administrators were not identified by name or by where they worked. The school district was not named in the study. The researcher assigned each participant a number to ensure anonymity and to maintain confidentiality. All interview notes and transcripts were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home and will be shredded and destroyed 2 years after completion of the study.

Instrumentation

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, the researcher used the interview process. It was determined that interviews would be the most appropriate research design for collecting data. Conducting interviews is a common approach to qualitative research. During the interview

process, the researcher established rapport with the participants. Each interview consisted of six open-ended questions relating to the administrator's role in determining disciplining practices for African American students and their perceptions of these decisions on the trajectory of African American students. The questions focused on interactions between student groups, philosophical approaches to discipline, school policies, and discretionary discipline decisions. The interview participants were 15 school administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels who held the position of principal or assistant principal. The participants discussed their experiences in an urban public school district focusing on student discipline, African American students, and discipline policies and practices. The interviews were semistructured with six planned questions, but there was flexibility to modify the wording and order of the questions based on the participant's responses. Conducting interviews allowed the researcher to collect information with a detailed understanding of the topic. An interview allows for control over the order and natural flow of the questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

A phenomenological research study was conducted to identify the criteria used by administrators to determine how they discipline students. The research explored the discipline policies and practices and the effect of administrators' disciplinary practice on the educational trajectory of African American students. It was also designed to identify the discipline biases and inequalities that might affect African American students. The research involved face-to-face, open-ended, in-depth interviewing and analysis of school administrators' discipline practices. Phenomenological research focuses on lived experiences and how experiences transform into consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Open-ended questions were used so that there would be a focus on listening to the respondent and the questions would take shape during the

discussion. Open-ended questions enabled the participant to speak freely, which allowed the researcher to gain insight into the topic. The data were collected face to face, as all participants lived and worked in the local area. Participation in the study was based on the first 15 administrators to respond to the request to participate. The particular demographics of the administrators who participated in the study varied based on years of experience, race, gender, and grade span.

Prior to researching a subject, the researcher usually has some experience with the phenomenon to explore a personal connection to the topic and to be aware of personal prejudices, views, and assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process is called epoche. According to Moustakas (1994), “In the epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited” (p. 33). Bracketing is the process in which the researcher sets aside prejudices and assumptions. In this study, bracketing was used to set aside biases and to examine consciousness.

Data Collection Approaches

The data were collected through semistructured, open-ended interview questions. Interview questions were developed based on the topic. Interviews were conducted following the approval of the University of Redland IRB. The initial recruitment of participants took approximately 1 week. The invitation to participate was sent via electronic email to the subject population of 54 school district administrators with the title of principal or assistant principal. A follow-up telephone call was made to those who did not respond initially to the email. The researcher’s contact information was provided, along with a brief overview of the purpose of the study.

Participants were willing to be a part of the study and expressed interest in the topic. Several indicated that they were eager to be a part of the study and felt privileged and excited to participate. The participant pool was limited to the first 15 administrators who responded positively to the request to participate. The use of criterion sampling was successful in achieving the number of participants anticipated for the study, along with a diverse group of administrators from within the school district.

The participants were thanked for their willingness to be a part of the study, provided a brief overview of the purpose of the study, and informed of the IRB requirement of completing the consent form (Appendix E). All participants cooperated and were interviewed in a setting of their choosing, using the same open-ended interview questions to ensure consistency with follow-up questions for clarification when necessary (Appendix F). The interviews were concluded over 6 weeks, based on participants' schedules. The time for the participant interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness to speak freely and openly about the topic. The interview questions were asked in the same manner for consistency.

Upon completion of the interviews, the notes were transcribed from the audio recordings and participants were identified using numbers 01 through 15. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcriptions.

Ethical Issues

There are many things to consider when collecting data for qualitative research. Ethical consideration must be given to gaining access and permissions, having a good qualitative sampling strategy, recording information, responding to issues that may arise, and keeping the data secure and confidential (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher is a district-level administrator in the school district where the research was conducted. Careful consideration was

given to ensure that the researcher had no supervisory or evaluative role over any district employees (principals or assistant principals) who participated in the study. Specifically, the researcher did not supervise or evaluate principals or assistant principals in the district. The participants were notified that the research study was independent of the school district and that they were not required to participate. There were no adverse actions against any principal or assistant principal who chose not to participate in the study. Appropriate clearance was given by the district's gatekeeper to conduct research in the district.

Establishing a purposeful sample is critical when collecting data. The participant sample was representative of individual administrators, which enabled the researcher to be informed about the research problem. Fifty-four school site administrators were invited to be part of the research study based on their job title and recruitment was private. The first 15 administrators to respond were interviewed. Criterion sampling is an example of accurate and systematic data collection, which is critical when conducting research.

Interviews were conducted at times that were convenient for the participating administrators. Administrators were able to choose the interview environment that was most comfortable for them. Interviews were conducted at the district office, the participant's office, or the local Starbucks coffee shop. The interview environment was low stress. The participants were invited to take a break at any point in the interview if they became tired. They were informed that they could skip a question and come back to it later in the interview. Participants could decline to answer any question and could stop the interview at any time. The interview process took 6 weeks to complete for all 15 interviews. A voice recorder was used for audiotaping and the recordings were transferred to a password-protected computer for secure storage. All participants were assured privacy and told that they would not be identified by name

or school site. Each participant was assigned a participant number. The participants worked and lived in the local geographical area, but there were constraints related to work schedules, personal commitments, and vacation schedules.

Data Analysis

Coded interview data were categorized into themes. The data were reviewed to highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was important to organize the data. Breaking the data into categories by using codes was essential to developing themes. Both collective and individual themes can emerge from analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Individual themes are those that are unique to one or a couple of participants. There were no individual themes established from the interview data. Collective themes are common across a group of participants who experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Collective themes were prevalent in the data. Quantitative data counts the numbers of frequencies, while coding in qualitative research arranges data into categories to develop conceptual themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis took place throughout the interviews. The interview responses were transcribed and analyzed and the data were analyzed and coded into categories, patterns, and themes. Data were stored using an electronic format of Microsoft Office®, backup storage on a computer hard drive, flash drive, and email (cloud). Written documentation was stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home and organized for easy identification and retrieval.

The interview data collected from participants were analyzed using NVivo™ software. The software is a qualitative data analysis tool used to manage data and identify themes. The codes were used by the researcher to put data into categories and organize themes. The data were

organized into digital files and a naming system was created (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interview statements were clustered into themes and used to write a description of what the participants had experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A composite description was written to report the essence of the phenomenon, focused on the common experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The outcomes were presented to show understanding of the phenomenon.

Limitations of the Research Design

The results of the study could not be applied to all administrators because it focused on the experiences, perceptions, and philosophies of 15 administrators in a low-socioeconomic urban public school district located in southern California. The small sample size can be viewed as a limitation of the research. Phenomenological research describes how people describe things and experience through their senses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenological researchers may find it difficult to be objective in their interpretation and findings. No two researchers will interpret the data or summarize the findings in the same way. It is important that responses be analyzed to reflect the data of the participants.

The information provided by participants is vital in qualitative research. When conducting qualitative research, there are limitations when data are obtained from what participants say versus empirical data. Participants may be hesitant to voice thoughts around issues that could be seen as controversial when discussing interactions between racial groups. Since the researcher is a former school site administrator in the district, listening to accounts and reports of the participants' bias, societal inequality, and other anxieties could have made it difficult and stressful for the researcher to collect data (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). All

participants were relaxed and conversation flowed naturally; there were no visible signs of anxiety experienced by the researcher or participants during the interviews.

Role of the Researcher

I am an employee of the target school district. I have been an administrator in the district for 20 years and have 29 years experience in public school education. My experiences include being a teacher for 9 years (6 years in the current district and 3 years in another district), site administrator in the district for 16 years, and a district office administrator for the past 4 years. My position gave direct access to potential participants. I did not supervise or evaluate the principals or assistant principals in the target school district. Also, I had been a student in the district from kindergarten through 12th grade. Due to my lived experiences as a school site and district administrator and former student, I had a direct interest in how the disciplinary decisions of administrators in the district affect African American students. Over the years, there has been an increase in African American student suspensions and disproportionality.

Within the school district, there is a need to decrease student suspensions and expulsions of African American students. The district was identified as requiring Differentiated Assistance during the 2017-2018 school year, according to the California School Dashboard, in the area of student suspensions of African American students. The district has been charged to focus on reducing the suspension rate of African American students and the disproportionality rate at which African American students are suspended.

The role of the researcher in a qualitative research study is critical, as the researcher collects data and implements analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was potential for bias because of my direct experience as a school site administrator and particularly a school site administrator in the district. My experience in education and as an administrator aided in data

collection, inductive analysis, and understanding the process and the phenomena being studied. The use of epoche (bracketing) is important to set aside personal feelings as a result of being connected to the research.

Since I am a former site administrator in the district, there were challenges of subjectivity, which could be an issue in qualitative research. I knew the participants in the study either directly or indirectly due to my district-level administrative position in the district. I had no supervisory or evaluative role over any district employees (principals or assistant principals) who participated in the study. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identified three advantages of being an insider-researcher: (a) having a greater understanding of the culture, (b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally, and (c) having an established relationship that promotes both the telling and the judging of truth. An inside researcher knows the institutional norms of the school district and can gain access to information that may be an obstacle for outside researchers.

Validity and Reliability

Unlike quantitative researchers, who use statistics to establish validity and reliability, qualitative researchers incorporate strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. In order to establish the validity of the study, the researcher accounted for personal biases by acknowledging biases in sampling and ongoing critical reflection of methods to ensure the depth and relevance of the data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Keeping accurate records ensured that interpretation of the data was consistent and transparent. Participants reviewed their interview transcriptions for accuracy to ensure that the themes reflected the phenomena being investigated.

Integrity of participants must be protected and it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that data are collected efficiently and reported accurately. This researcher remained

neutral to reduce bias that could taint the reliability of the research. The participants trusted the researcher and fully disclosed their ideas, thoughts, and perceptions, which contributed to the accuracy and validity of the study. Participants' identities were protected and will remain confidential.

Informed Consent

The participants were given time to consider their participation in the study without coercion. Each voluntary participant signed the informed consent form. Answers were provided for any questions that the participants had about the study and they were ensured about the protection of their privacy and release of information. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the phenomenological qualitative design used to examine the personal lived experiences of administrators in determining disciplining practices for African American students and their perception of the effect of these decisions on the trajectory of African American students. A methodology was used to conduct the research based on the research question and the purpose of the study. The importance of an appropriate methodology and design was to ensure that the researcher was incorporating an appropriate instrument to collect the research data.

The reason for the district selection and district demographics were reviewed, as well as the participant selection process, and ethical issues that could be encountered when conducting the study. The researcher conducted the study using ethical standards following the research code of ethics as outlined by the IRB.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of conducting the qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of administrators in determining disciplinary practices that have an effect on the educational trajectory of African American students. The research was conducted to capture data from current school site administrators in a TK–12th-grade urban school district in southern California. All of the administrators in the study held the position of school site principal or assistant principal at the time of the data collection. The objective of the study was to gather information from participants regarding their lived experiences as administrators who discipline students, in particular African American students. Also, the purpose was to determine whether the administrators perceived that their decisions had an impact on the educational trajectory of African American students.

The participation criteria for this study were school site principals or assistant principals currently employed in the particular urban school district that was selected. All participants had experience in disciplining students in their administrative positions. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 school site administrators of various genders, races, and years of experience in the field of education and educational administration. The participants were recruited for the study from among 54 school site administrators in the selected urban school district. The first 15 administrators to respond to the request to participate were interviewed. The qualitative phenomenological research method was selected to engage participants in an open-ended discussion to capture the nature of their lived experiences regarding the effect of their disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students.

The coding of the data and development of themes were captured through use of NVivo software. The collected data may assist school administrators, teachers, and parents to

understand the effect of school administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students throughout their school career. Leaders may begin to examine their decision-making practices and work to become more culturally responsive school leaders to promote advancement of all students in the educational system as it pertains to school discipline models that promote equitable practices. Such a change could have a positive effect on the trajectory for African American students. It was the researcher's responsibility to capture the lived experiences, ideas, and perceptions of 15 school site administrators in a TK–12th-grade urban school district. The collected data reflect how administrators see themselves in making discipline decisions.

This chapter reports the data findings of the qualitative phenomenological study. The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The phenomenological research study was conducted using semistructured interview questions designed to collect data from 15 current school site administrators holding the position of principal or assistant principal in an urban school district servicing grades Preschool to 12th grade. The phenomenological research methods introduced by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018) were applied to describe the collected data. The consists of the following topics: Research Question, Demographic Overview, Data Analysis, Findings of the Study, and Summary.

Research Question

The central research question for this qualitative phenomenological study was as follows:

What is the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students? The intent of the central research question was to direct the phenomenological study toward exploring the personal lived experiences, perceptions, and

opinions of school administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels who have disciplined students in general and African American students in particular for a variety of infractions that were committed in a school setting. The intent was to explore their perceptions related to the effect that these disciplinary practices have on the educational trajectory of African American students. The most effective way to gain their perspective of the phenomenon was by using the research tool of conducting interviews to collect data to be analyzed to detect the behavior, attitudes, themes, and trends that provide information regarding the discipline practices and decisions of school site administrators and their impact on African American students.

The function of the open-ended interview questions was to engage the participants in dialogue regarding their thoughts about the topic without limiting their responses to “right or wrong” answers. Encouraging participants to share their lived experiences often causes them to reflect deeply and to respond to situations related to the topic.

Demographic Overview

The semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 participants. The demographic data consisted of educational level, job classification (grade level and position), gender, race, total years in education (including certificated positions and administration), and total years in administration. The study focused on individuals who held the job classification of elementary, middle, or high school principals or assistant principals. The participants were all public school administrators in TK to 12th grade who provided a purposeful random sampling for this study.

In order to be a certificated administrator in California, a person must have a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in the district of employment. All participants had bachelor’s and master’s degrees and five participants (33.3%) had a doctorate (Table 1). A doctorate is not required to be a school site administrator.

Table 1*Education Level*

Degree	<i>n</i>	%
Bachelor's	15	100.0
Master's	15	100.0
Doctorate	5	33.0

At the time of the interviews, the administrators' job classifications were either principal or assistant principal assigned to an elementary, middle, or high school level in the school district (Table 2). The breakdown of the job classifications was based on their employment at the time of the interviews. Of the 15 participants, 40% worked at the elementary level, 27% worked at the middle school level, and 33% worked at the high school level. Seventy-five percent of the participants were principals. All of the participating principals had previously held the position of assistant principal. Twenty-five percent of the participants were currently assistant principals (Table 3).

Table 4 shows the distribution of the sample by gender: 47% were males and 53% were females. Table 5 shows the distribution of the sample by race; 40% were White, 33% were African American, and 27% were Hispanic or Latino. Table 6 shows the number of years in certificated teaching and/or counseling positions and administration and Table 7 shows the years of experience as a principal or assistant principal. The ranges for both categories of years of experience were < 5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, and 21+.

Table 2*Job Classification: Grade Level*

Grade level	<i>n</i>	%
Elementary	6	40
Middle	4	27
High	5	33

Table 3*Job Classification (Principal or Assistant Principal)*

Position	<i>n</i>	%
Principal	10	75
Assistant Principal	5	25

Table 4*Gender of Participants*

Gender	<i>n</i>	%
Male	7	47
Female	8	53

Table 5*Race of Participants*

Race	<i>n</i>	%
White	6	40
African American	5	33
Hispanic or Latino	4	27

Table 6*Years of Experience in Education*

Years	<i>n</i>	%
< 5	0	0
6–10	1	7
11–15	3	20
16–20	6	40
21+	5	33

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed to identify relationships and to develop common themes that emerged during the interviews. The researcher reviewed the participant data upon collection to determine the correlation of lived experiences that yielded similarities for preliminary groupings. The best way to analyze the data was to do so at the same time the data were collected so the

Table 7*Years of Experience in Administration (Principal or Assistant Principal)*

Years	<i>n</i>	%
< 5	3	20
6–10	9	60
11–15	2	13
16–20	1	7
21+	0	0

information was recent. Data analysis was conducted to make sense of the data. It involved interpreting what participants said about their lived experiences and what the researcher observed and had read regarding the research topic. The data produced information from the participants' lived experiences. It was important to review and extract relevant data that were significant to the research question in order to reduce redundancy and create meaningful data information.

The process of coding was done by reviewing the data and labeling texts, phrases, and statements using terms that specifically correlated to the study. The data were examined and categorized based on the coding to establish patterns. Themes were developed from the patterns and grouped for interpretation and connection to the research question. NVivo was used to organize and summarize the data into a format to draw conclusions.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study were composed of data extrapolated from the lived experiences of school site administrators who answered the interview question relating to this study. The central research question for this qualitative phenomenological study was, *What is the effect of*

administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?

The intent of the central research question was to direct the study toward the lived experiences, perceptions, and opinions of 15 school site administrators (principals and assistant principals) who had personal experiences in disciplining African American students. To capture the lived experiences of these school site administrators, six interview questions were asked: (a) What criteria do you use to discipline students? (b) Are those criteria applied differently to different groups of students or in different situations? If so, tell me more about those groups of students or situations; (c) How do you perceive your discipline practices impact the trajectory of students? (d) Do you think your discipline decisions impact one group of students more than another? If so, what group(s)? (e) How do you perceive your discipline practices impact the trajectory of African American students? and (f) How do you perceive the influence of race on discipline decisions?

The data analysis revealed meaningful clusters to advance understanding of the essential structure of the participants' lived experiences. Common themes emerged through analysis of an administrator's perceptions of experiences around the central phenomenon. Bernard et al. (2016) identified several approaches that were used in this study to identify themes, such as word repetition, keywords used in context, indigenous categories, metaphors and analogies, compare and contrast, pawing, and connectors. The approach used in this research study to identify patterns centered on word repetition, metaphors and analogies, and keywords used in context. The administrators used similar words and expressions when answering certain interview questions. The school site administrators were from the same district and common language is used among administrators. The words that appeared frequently were noted to show similarity.

Keywords were used in context by participants when answering questions focusing on discipline. Metaphors and analogies were used by administrators to describe similar experiences of the administrators that were related to the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. Although each participant was unique, similarities and commonalities emerged from the interview responses. The school site administrators shared similar lived experiences resulting in seven themes: (a) policies, rules, and procedures; (b) bias related to school discipline; (c) administrator discretion in discipline decisions; (d) participant impact on students; (e) participant impact on African American students; (f) influence of race on discipline decisions; and (g) culturally responsive school leadership.

Policies, Rules, and Procedures

The school site administrators were from various backgrounds, with various years of experience in education and administration. Responses received from the 15 participants acknowledged that policies, rules, and procedures have an influence on discipline decisions regarding students.

I always go by the educational code. If things are not covered in the educational code, for example, if a student is tardy to a class, that is not necessarily an Education Code violation, but it does violate school rules and expectations. . . . We do big expectation assemblies at the start of the year so all the kids know about the Education Code and the kids know what to expect. I try to hold kids to either one of the two criteria whenever I do discipline for their behavior. (Participant 2)

When I discipline students I look at their background history. If there are any students sent to me from a different school site I make sure to look at the cum [cumulative student record] and review that. . . . I also have to look at the educational code. What educational codes were violated during the offense and then I go from there. (Participant 7)

We review educational code as a basis. We also have a schoolwide discipline system supported through our PBIS [Positive Behavior Intervention and Support] expectations. We have schoolwide matrices that we use that have the expectations clearly stated for students. That is our basic discipline. (Participant 9)

Participant 5 acknowledged using procedures to determine how students are disciplined based on a number of factors. “I try to look at the whole picture, I will interview students, I will interview the witnesses, and look at their discipline history. Then from there, I will determine, depending on the situation, what the next action will be.”

I look at educational code. As administrators, we see everything from a kid being poked with a pencil to fights and weapons. We have to take into consideration a student’s age, district expectations, and school expectations. All of those pieces are taken into consideration. (Participant 11)

Biases Related to School Discipline

Although all administrators stated that they have rules, policies, and procedures in place to discipline students, the majority acknowledged biases in disciplinary practices. Ten of the 15 administrators reported bias in applying school discipline policies and procedures to students. Participant 3 indicated, “Discipline is applied differently to different groups of students. People are harsher, in my opinion, on African American males and females. I feel like I have to be a buffer.”

I want to say discipline is not applied differently but because of my training with the equity institute I think there constantly has to be an adjustment, maybe mindfulness on my part, to examine what are my perceptions, preconceived notions or biases. . . . We need to realize that there are differences in students that make their understanding of school rules and culture different. In school, we judge those differences. (Participant 8)

Participant 10 expressed comments that conveyed the presence of bias in the application of school discipline. “I believe rules are applied differently to different groups of students. If students have never been in trouble before sometimes it will be swept under the rug. Males tend to be harder on male students. They are harder on African American males.” Participant 5 shared, “I definitely believe discipline is applied differently towards different groups of students and in different situations. Every kid is unique and every situation is unique.” Participant 6

shared, “I believe everyone has unconscious biases. Early in my career, if certain groups of students came into my office: hammer!”

The majority of the participants agreed that there should be no biases in the educational system but acknowledged that biases exist when working with students and applying discipline practices and making decisions. Biases tend to be based on stereotypes, perceptions, students’ past histories, gender, academic ability, and racial group.

Administrator Discretion in Discipline Decision Making

All administrators acknowledged that they have discretion in making discipline decisions. All stated they have the authority to make discipline decisions based on various factors that impact students.

Is it an offense that warrants a suspension? What exactly happened? What are all the facts? Do I have to suspend you? No. As administrators, we can discuss whether or not the suspension is something we have to go through with. . . . Can we put you up for an expulsion? We can, but that is where the administrator has the right to make a different decision. (Participant 13)

Participant 15 indicated, “We try to look at the situation. Just because the scholar broke the rule does not mean they are bound to that discipline. We have to give students the opportunity to make a change.” Participant 4 explained, “I look at discipline case by case and not just by subgroup. I might discipline differently within a subgroup. I apply the discipline based on the situation.”

The described lived experiences of participants were in direct correlation with the theme of administrator discretion in discipline decision making. Participant 3 responded, “A student I had in the fifth or sixth grade was always in my office. I talked to his mom and I would not suspend him. That was a student they wanted me to expel and I would not do it.” Participant 7 asked, “Is it a suspension or expulsion? Those things are governed by principals and it is up to us if we want to make those decisions, then it goes to the next steps. You have to look at the history

of the child.” Participant 12 stated, “I feel like I try to mediate for students. In certain situations, some would say you should suspend. I try really hard not to and in many situations I do not suspend.”

The perceptions of the participants were consistent with work by Findlay (2015) in which the author examined discretion by principals in their disciplinary decision making. The participant principals viewed discretion in discipline decisions as a way to allow them to be more fair and equitable. Participant 10 explained, “When I started as an assistant principal, I was the hatchet. As I evolved, I realized I could give time out and no home discipline and get better results. I started to consider things differently and make different decisions.” Participant 6 responded, “As I became more experienced and learned about where a kid was coming from and their history, discipline became less criterion-based and more student based. I learned to look at the whole child when making decisions.”

Participant Impact on Students

Participants were asked to respond regarding their discipline decisions and their perceived impact on students. Twelve of the 15 participants agreed that their discipline decisions had an impact on students. Participant 13 responded, “An administrator can say, ‘I am going to suspend you,’ and that changes the trajectory for students. If I can suspend you until you are expelled, that can have a devastating impact on the trajectory of students.” Participant 11 stated, “I am aware of the school-to-prison pipeline. This is a kindergarten or first-grade student and once you put a suspension on their record, it impacts how kids are perceived.”

When we first start being presented with the school-to-prison pipeline information, it opened my eyes to what we were doing to these students taking them away from the educational system and sending them home. . . . I tell students I’m not going to send you home and take you away from your education which is what you need to be successful in life. (Participant 2)

Participant 9 explained, “The choices we make as far as consequences for students can play a positive or negative role depending on the situation. Sometimes a consequence can help a student make better choices for the future. Sometimes it can be the opposite.” Participant 1 stated, “I’m not one to suspend right away because I want to do interventions myself. If you have the triangle of support—school, parent, and child, you can make a difference for students.” Participant 3 expressed that suspending students leads to multiple suspensions. A student’s trajectory is impacted negatively when they miss instruction and fall behind in school. Participant 12 explained that the impact of the discipline criteria may be different for different students and that determines their trajectory positively in some cases and negatively in other situations. Participant 12 stated, “If my discipline practices make a student give up on education, I have the wrong discipline practices. My practices should inform a student on how to be a better citizen.” Participant 15 had personal experience regarding negative discipline encounters in school with administrators and did not like school because of the way school officials treated students. Because of their own negative experiences in school, Participant 15 expressed having a positive impact on the lives of students by listening to them and treating them fairly.

Participant Impact on African American Students

Participants were asked whether their discipline decisions had either a negative or positive impact on African American students. Feedback received from 14 participating administrators showed their position that their discipline decisions had a direct impact on African American students.

If we have African American students away from school more than other groups of students that will not only affect their academics, but their social health. . . . Judgments start to be made about students and certain stereotypes are perpetuated. I do believe that when an African American student is suspended, they are looked at negatively by staff and their peers when they return to school. (Participant 2)

Participant 10 reflected that the school-to-prison pipeline is opened when a negative stigma is assigned to African American students. Punitive discipline over time can have a negative impact on the trajectory of African American students. Participant 11 said that these decision have an impact on African American students but sometimes the students do not see the administrator as someone who is trying to help them because they are not of the same race as the students. Participant 11 stated, “I know that suspending Black boys puts a tag on the students. It does stay with them and it also impacts the student mentally. It affects how they see themselves in the future.”

Participant 3 stated that these decisions have had a positive impact on the trajectory of African American students because they have implemented other means of correction and interventions outside of suspension. “I have always made sure African American students have been treated fairly. I have seen educators favor one group of students over another and that is not fair.” Participant 4 indicated, “I try to be equitable and give everybody the same opportunity to succeed. I understand the importance of African American students being in class.” Participant 13 stated, “I’m looking at the whole child and trying to meet their social and emotional needs. I feel because of that I positively impact students. If I can help change the trajectory for students in a positive way, I will do that.” Participant 7 shared thoughts regarding being a positive role model for African American students on campus so the students can see a positive reflection of themselves as being extremely important. A positive role model can help them to decide their pathway in life, from going to college to their profession in life in the future. Participant 15 recommended influencing the trajectory for African American students in a positive way by building relationships with them and showing genuine care for their emotional and academic success.

Influence of Race on Discipline Decisions

The majority of participants indicated that race plays a role in discipline decisions. They reported that, although race was not always a conscious part of their decision making, it influenced outcomes. Eleven of the 15 participants indicated race as a factor in discipline decisions. Participant 14 remarked that some administrators and educators are aware of the influence of race but others are not. Participant 14 explained that the influence of race has to do with how race has impacted the administrator personally and helped to shape the administrator's experiences and form perceptions. Participant 7 expressed a similar response. "Race is a factor in discipline, but you need to look at the background of the person who is disciplining the student. What were their personal experiences in school? That could impact their decisions."

Participant 11 reflected on a lived experience and stated, "I do see the way educators react to minority students. I think, if they were White or a girl, would they be treated differently?"

Race absolutely is a factor in my discipline decisions. It does not mean I will or will not suspend. I look at discipline disproportionality, so it does affect me. I do not want race to be a factor, but it should not be disproportionate in how we discipline students.
(Participant 13)

Participant 10 reflected that, in the ,past they had often disciplined African American students more severely because they thought that they needed tougher consequences to teach them a lesson about life and what to expect from society. They feel now that that was not the right approach. Participant 8 expressed that there are different norms in different settings. Often, if students of a certain race do not fit into those school norms, they are labeled as bad students. Participant 3 stated, "Race is a big influence. Sometimes people get caught up in stereotypes and I am speaking from personal experience." Participant 3 noted more advocates in schools taking cases involving African American students who have been disciplined unfairly based on their

race. Participant 2 said, “Race has an influence on discipline based on perceptions” and added that infractions committed by African American students are dealt with more harshly than the same infractions committed by White or Asian students.

Minority participant administrators, in particular African American administrators, stated strongly that race influenced the disciplinary practices of administrators. All reported racial biases in the practices of school administrators toward African American students.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

The participants’ responses expressed culturally responsive school leadership in four ways: critical self-reflection, curriculum and instruction, school context and climate, and community engagement. School leaders are in the position to bring about culturally responsive behaviors in their schools. The lived experiences of the administrators related to their answers to the questions reflected cultural awareness as school leaders. Twelve participants exhibited characteristics of culturally responsive school leadership. Responses from the participants indicated a need to build relationships with students and to learn about the community in order to relate to the students and families whom they serve.

I have worked with African American students since I started in education. I understand the culture and where the students are coming from. . . . Get to know your kids and where they are coming from. Get to know their background. If you do the same for all kids, the discipline model we have at school can work, and we will not have to suspend as much.
(Participant 1)

Participant 2 acknowledged that schools historically did not have supports in place but noted that schools are changing to meet the social-emotional needs of students. “I make a point to tell students I miss them when they are gone. I want them to know this is their school community and we care about them. We are trying to personalize school for students.”

Participant 4 talked about involving parents in the discipline process by discussing the student

offense with the parents and in some situations coming up with an alternative to suspension when possible.

Social/emotional support starts with building a relationship. I ask them in the morning how they woke up. What happens to students before school impacts how they behave at school during the day. It goes back to relationships. It is not my goal to suspend students. (Participant 5)

Participant 7 explained how the school site has developed a check-in and check-out system for students who have difficulty during the school day so the school can intervene before a discipline infraction occurs. “You mentor the students, so they know you care. You have to get at the root cause of why you are suspending the child. When you send them home they are missing instruction and that is not good for the student.”

Participant 8 expressed the need to be aware of culture when dealing with student discipline, addressing the infraction based on the person and taking many things into consideration, including home and how it influences the student and the behavior. Participant 13 stated, “I try to look at the whole child. I am looking at their background. Not just the incident. What were their triggers? There is a reason for the behavior. Students do not choose to get into trouble.” Participants 6, 12, and 15 indicated that a relationship with students is critical when working to change student behaviors. Administrators cannot work effectively with students if significant relationships are not built between home, school, and the community. Participant 14 indicated, “We need to find out what is the student’s story. The negative behavior does not define who you are. Is this who you want to be?”

Chapter Summary

The purpose of conducting the qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of administrators related to the effect of their disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The administrators shared their encounters,

experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding student disciplinary practices and discretionary decision making in school discipline.

The participants shared reflections of their experiences in working with all students in general and particularly with African American students. They shared insights about the rules that they followed and the decisions that they made that affected the educational trajectory for African American students. The participants were open and spoke freely about their experiences as school administrators. Some spoke about their own personal journey in becoming a more culturally responsive leader, based on past and present student interactions related to discipline. African American and Hispanic/Latino leaders related to the importance of culturally responsive leadership. All participants were open to developing culturally responsive school leadership tenets to promote equity and access for all students.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological research study described the lived experiences of administrators and the effect of the administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The participants told their personal stories and related their encounters as school site administrators working with students in a TK–12th-grade urban school district in southern California. The participants focused on policies, rules, procedures, and biases related to school discipline, administrator discretion in discipline decisions, participant impact on students, participant impact on African American students, and culturally responsive school leadership. The data were obtained through interviews and analyzed using NVivo to assist in organizing, coding, and categorizing the data into patterns and themes. The central research question for this qualitative phenomenological study was, *What is the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?*

Chapter 5 presents the conclusion and recommendations derived from the findings of the study. The chapter addresses the following: Discussion of the Study Findings and the Literature, Interpretation of Findings by Themes, Study Limitations and Bias, Implications for Theory and Research, Implications, Significance of the Study to Educational Leadership, Recommendations, Recommendations for Future Research, Conclusion, and Summary.

Discussion of the Study Findings and the Literature

The central research question for this qualitative phenomenological study was, *What is the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?* The study examined the perceived impact of administrators' disciplinary practices and decisions on the educational trajectory of African American students as told by 15 school site administrators based on their lived experiences.

The majority of administrators (93%) agreed that their discipline decisions had an impact on the trajectory of African American students. Fourteen of the 15 administrators specifically responded that their discipline decisions have a direct influence on African American students. DeMatthews et al. (2017) noted that administrators contributed to the discipline gap because they gathered information from teachers and determined how students would be disciplined based on the infraction. Exclusionary disciplinary practices do not benefit African American students. A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) showed a correlation between the achievement gap and the discipline gap in schools.

DeMatthews (2016) reported that African American students receive the consequences of exclusionary discipline practices at higher rates than any other group of students. Often, African American students are disciplined for infractions that students of other races were not disciplined. Whitford et al. (2016) found that administrators' perceptions had a greater influence on student discipline than the student's behavior or infraction. One current participant explained that, although they do not want to believe that their decisions have ever negatively impacted African American students, they realize that there have been times when African American students have been disciplined more harshly for minor offenses that could negatively impact their trajectory in school.

The participants talked about the school-to-prison pipeline and expressed a desire to impact the trajectory of African American students positively rather than negatively. Butler et al. (2012) indicated that school districts should provide data and information about exclusionary discipline practices in an effort to bring attention to school practices that reflect disproportionality in school discipline. Not only should data be provided; internal protocols and

practices should be established to eliminate practices that do not benefit all students and unfairly target African American students.

Interpretation of Findings by Themes

The data analysis for this study consisted of interpreting the words and thoughts from the participants' responses to the interview questions. During the interview process, patterns were identified and summarized to develop core themes. The seven themes that emerged from the interview question responses were (a) policies, rules, and procedures; (b) biases related to school discipline; (c) administrator discretion in discipline decisions; (d) participant impact on students; (e) participant impact on African American students; (f) influence of race on discipline decisions; and (g) culturally responsive school leadership.

Theme 1: Policies, Rules, and Procedures

Fifteen principals and assistant principals described their lived experiences of disciplining all students and African American students and how they made decisions regarding student discipline. All participants said that they looked to rules, policies, and procedures when disciplining students. Progressive discipline resonated in the practice of how administrators looked at the previous offenses of students to determine the type of discipline to assign to students. Butchart and McEwan (1998) examined the use of progressive discipline in American schools at the turn of the 20th century. During this time, educators learned to separate their feelings from their judgments regarding classroom discipline. If a certain infraction was committed, there were prescribed steps to follow based on the number of offenses or the type of infraction committed by the student.

Artiles and Kozleski (2007) highlighted the movement away from solely progressive discipline to a movement focused on control over students' behaviors. Rewards and

consequences were established. Students who followed the rules would be rewarded and students who broke the rules would face an established punishment, usually based on progressive discipline. Responses from the study participants were reinforced by findings reported by Harper et al. (2009), who found that school policies affecting African American students showed a lack of sustained advancements for African American students. Responses from the current participants substantiated that school policies, rules, and procedures were important factors in considering the steps for student discipline. Those rules, policies, and procedures were accepted as a basis to guide discipline for all students. Administrators did not always consider whether the rules, policies or procedures were not fair toward certain student groups. Losen (2015) pointed to evidence that most discipline policies and practices are controlled by teachers and administrators. Education code from the state was perceived as accepted rules that were established by the system and could not be challenged. According to one participant, the education code “is what it is” and cannot be changed and or disputed.

Okonofua and Eberhart (2015) identified inequitable application of school rules, policies, and procedures toward African American students that contributed to the racial achievement and discipline gap. Comments from participants reflected an understanding that there are circumstances in which policy alone should not be the determining factor in the application of school discipline. The participants discussed examining the history of students, outside circumstances, and examining discipline on a case-by-case basis to determine discipline outcomes. Administrative perceptions can alter discriminatory discipline (Whitford et al., 2016). Several participants commented that they had the ability to control application of school rules, policies, and procedures but were hesitant to do so due to perceptions of being inequitable. All of the administrators wanted to be perceived as fair and impartial.

Theme 2: Biases Related to School Discipline

Ten of the 15 participants acknowledged biases related to school discipline. They noted that, in some circumstances, discipline is applied more harshly to African American students than to other student groups. Several participants referred to unconscious and conscious biases that impact their discipline decisions. They reported having witnessed inequities and a decision to go along with the system, but they were unsure how they could change the system. One participant noted that they see the biases and how educators treat African American students differently from students of other races. That administrator did not know how to have a conversation with staff members about equitable practices and application of discipline. The participants reported that they see African American students being sent out of class more than others but could not articulate what they could do to stop such practices. The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2016) reported that African American students were three times more likely to be suspended for the same or lesser offenses than their White classmates.

The participants perceived that biases were present in the school system, specifically as related to student discipline. The fate of students is in the hands of administrators who rely on the input of classroom teachers and discipline policies and practices to determine a student's fate. DeMatthews et al. (2017) found race to be a critical factor in disciplinary decisions made by administrators. Participant 2 indicated that discipline decisions have a greater impact on students of color than on other groups of students. Ten participants acknowledged that behaviors exhibited by one student group may not be considered negative but if the same behaviors are exhibited by African American students, perceptions change and the behaviors are viewed negatively. These participants agreed that biases existed regarding student behavior based on student race and stereotypes prevalent in the school culture.

Participant 3 stated, “I believe if you are going to discipline, what you do for one, do for the other. If you have to be willing to sit down and have a conversation with one student, you need to do that for other students as well.” Participant 5 explained that schools are a microcosm of society. It is important to be cognizant of the way in which race impacts discipline. Educators act out their prejudices covertly. When three or four African American students are sent to the office, it is not always their fault.

You hear people talk about those people and that is what they do so discipline is applied differently for one group of students than another. . . . Being a person of color, I understand what society thinks should happen or what behavior they think a certain group of people will exhibit, so this is just what is going to happen to them because that is what they do. (Participant 13)

Khalifa (2018) suggested that, in order to be an effective school leader, it is important to recognize prejudices, biases, and stereotypes in order to be open to learning new knowledge and new ways of relating to students.

Theme 3: Administrator Discretion in Discipline Decisions

The participants’ responses relating to administrator discretion in discipline decision making were unanimous. While they stated that they are governed by rules, policies, and procedures established by the school site, school district, and the educational code, they acknowledged that, as school site principal or assistant principal, they have discretion in the application of disciplinary practices and decisions.

Participant 2 shared that at the beginning of the school year, the administrative team reviews rules that are not necessarily education code violations and decide as a team how they want to handle those infractions when students violate a particular policy. Infractions that lie in a grey area are looked case by case and can be handled one way by one administrator and another way by another administrator. Participant 4 expressed that, while there is an effort to make the majority of discipline decisions based on intervention, there has been an increase in

administrators' decisions to suspend based on the nature of the student infraction. Participant 5 stated that student discipline depends on what the student did to be sent to the office. Listening to a student's story helps to determine the type of discipline that will be administered. Participant 7 explained about reviewing the level of the infraction prior to making discipline decisions. It is an administrator's decision to suspend or expel a student based on the student's history or information related to the incident. Participant 15 stated, "One discipline style does not fit all. It is about looking at the whole child."

The participants' experiences are related to the findings in the literature. Anderson and Ritter (2018) found that administrators used many factors to make decisions, such as their perceptions and rules, with respect to maintaining a system of order in school. Findlay (2015) found that, because administrators have to base their decisions on broad principles that influence outcomes, almost every decision made by a school site administrator is based on a level of personal discretion. Discretionary decision making generally holds true, especially in nonviolent situations such as defiance or other types of minor offenses. Most administrators stated that they must suspend for a fight. Some administrators, even when the violation was nonsubjective, exercised their authority to determine a different level of discipline. Participant 13 expressed that suspension is often what a student may deserve or what they want to happen, but the administrator will seek other methods of correction to avoid suspending the student to keep the student in school. Whitford et al. (2016) found that an administrator's perceptions can alter discipline decisions based on the student. In theory, administrators would base decisions solely on the facts of an incident; however, in practice, subjectivity is a large part of how administrators discipline students. This influences which groups of students may or may not benefit from their discretionary decision making regarding student discipline.

Theme 4: Participants Impact on Students

Twelve of the 15 participants agreed that the decisions that they made as administrators had an impact on the trajectory of students. This high percentage of participants' responses shows that the administrators saw themselves as influential in the future of students. The administrators responded that they hoped to have a positive impact on students but were not always sure that their impact was positive, based on their disciplinary practices and decisions. Participant 10 noted that male administrators were not as hard on female students. As a result, male students, especially African American males, received more serious consequences and were not fairly treated by administrators, which resulted in African American males becoming disengaged in school.

Research has documented that students who did not feel supported were more likely to engage in negative behavior (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). A. Gregory and Mosley (2004) reported a correlation between the achievement gap and the discipline gap. Students who were excluded from school due to discipline were less likely to succeed academically. The current administrators agreed that they did not want their discipline decisions to be a negative life sentence for students. Participant 5 expressed that making discipline decisions that impact students is one of the most powerful things that an administrator can do within the scope of the job. The decisions that an administrator makes can help a community.

Theme 5: Participant Impact on African American Students

The responses of 14 of the 15 participants indicated that their discipline decisions had a direct impact on African American students. The administrators' perceptions of African American student impact as a result of their disciplining practices were aligned to the literature related to the research study. In the literature, it was found that African American students were

disproportionately suspended from school even though they did not display higher rates of misbehavior (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013). African American students are suspended three times more than White students and twice as much as Native American or Hispanic students (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; De Matthews et al., 2017). According to DeMatthews et al. (2017), race is a critical variable used by principals in discipline decisions.

Participant 2 expressed that discipline decisions administrators make have an impact on African American students. Participant 2 further stated that keeping African American students away from school limits their academic and social growth. Administrators should ask whether a student of another race would be sent home for the same infraction. Participant 4 shared that they try to be equitable because they understand the importance of African American students being in school.

The participants recognized that discipline impacts African American students differently than other student groups, based on what they have experienced as administrators and how discipline is applied to students. There was a recognition that school policies, practices, and norms often leave African American students at a disadvantage regarding exclusionary school discipline. The school administrators saw themselves as advocates for students and more racially sensitive than teachers or other staff members.

Theme 6: Influence of Race on Student Discipline

The responses by 11 of the 15 participants indicated that race plays a role in discipline decisions. The participants shared their experiences of dealing with minority students and discipline decisions. The literature indicated that, when discipline required discretionary decision making, harsher punishment was more often applied to African American students than to students of other races. Research has established a discipline gap between African American

students and White students. While participants acknowledged the influence of race on decision making, they expressed that discipline decisions should not be race based. Participant 8 stated, “I think that race does influence the dominant culture. It should not influence discipline decisions but it should be something we are mindful about.”

The participants indicated that race was an influential factor in discipline in how it influences teachers, students, and administrators. Participant 14 expressed that teachers often do not realize how they impact students of different races. The administrators agreed that teachers and other school employees wanted administrators to discipline students based on their own personal biases. The participants highlighted interesting perceptions of their own race influencing decisions more so than that of the student who committed the infraction. Participant 13 stated, “My race influences discipline decisions because I know personally how African American students will be viewed. . . . I do not let the race of the student influence my decisions.” Many administrators stated that they did not want race to be a factor but acknowledged that it was a factor either in their decision making or in the perceptions of other educators, all of which had an impact on how discipline was administered to students.

Theme 7: Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Twelve of the 15 participants exhibited characteristics of culturally responsive school leadership. Culturally responsive school leadership influences diverse school populations by setting aside biases and making an effort to connect with the school and home community. When schools and school leaders are culturally responsive, they create a school that is accepting of minority students (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). Participant 14 expressed that it is key to build relationships with students and their families in order to meet their needs. “I see teachers who send out African American students for behaving no differently than other students. I see

that and it is hard to address, so I encourage teachers to build relationships and get to know students.”

Participants agreed that connecting with students would help to overcome biases in school and increase inclusionary practices to close the discipline gap for African American students. Participant 13 recommended looking at the whole child and the reasons for the behavior, including considering the antecedents that triggered the behavior that may or may not be caused by the school environment. According to Theoharis (2009), culturally responsive school leaders promote a climate that meets the needs of students, parents, and teachers within the cultural context of the community that they serve. Participant 8 recommended being mindful of personal preconceived perceptions and biases and working to overcome those to create a more equitable environment for students. Participant 8 stated that administrators should create an environment where all students fit in. It is not the responsibility of the student to adapt to the school’s culture; the school should adapt and meet the needs of the students. Participant 2 stated, “It is our responsibility as leaders to understand where the kids are coming from. If we can do that, we can help all students.”

Study Limitations and Bias

Shared Perceptions

The participants who volunteered to be a part of this research study willingly shared their lived experiences as school site administrators (principals and assistant principals). Each participant was given an informed consent form to review and sign. The consent form outlined the procedures for conducting the study and informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants shared their lived experiences openly and candidly, apparently without fear of disclosure. A reasonable assumption was formed concerning the

participants' believable recollection of experiences and occurrences. A presumption was formed that the participant population for this study was a sufficient representation of school site administrators.

Geographical Location and Sample Size

All interviews were conducted within the participating district or an agreed-upon local venue. The geographical location was not a challenge in conducting the research because all participants worked in the same school district. The purposeful sample size limited the possibility for a broader population based on the phenomenological research model used for this study. Fifty-four participants were recruited to take part in the interviews. Scheduling the participants was challenging because all interviews were conducted after work hours and participants had varying schedules. It was important that participants not be inconvenienced. Due to the nature of the study, privacy and confidentiality were maintained.

Avoiding Researcher Bias

The researcher is an employee in the target district. Participants were recruited from within the district. The participants were not supervised or evaluated by the researcher. The participants were notified that the research study was independent of the school district. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of their participation was reviewed prior to conducting the interviews. All guidelines and procedures instituted for qualitative research were upheld and maintained through the research process as set forth by the university's IRB.

Fifty-four potential participants with the title of principal or assistant principal were sent recruitment letters, seeking their participation. The first 15 administrators to respond participated in interviews. In order to limit researcher bias, semistructured open-ended interview questions were developed to ensure that participants were asked the same questions. Trust was established

between the participants and the researcher by presenting an inviting, nonthreatening, and professional environment. Responses were audio recorded for accuracy and were not judged during the interview process. Participants were given the opportunity to clarify responses or go into further detail as they saw fit in order to capture their personal lived experiences.

Implications for Theory and Research

Chapter 2 reviewed the theoretical frameworks that influenced the research study. The theoretical frameworks related to this research were CRT, culturally responsive school leadership, and CRD.

Critical Race Theory

CRT is an analysis of race in society and how it impacts equity and access. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), CRT provides a lens through which to examine how race impacts every aspect of life for African Americans and how it relates to the social injustices that have been encountered throughout history. The results of this study confirmed that the school site administrators perceived race to be an influence on decisions made regarding discipline in schools. Eleven of the 15 participants identified race as a factor in discipline decisions. Some described punishing students in the name of neutrality and consistency without considering race. Others recognized that, without examining all of the circumstances (including race) when a student is referred to the office, they could be making decisions that would reflect the opposite of equitable decision making.

The participants stated that, while race was not always a conscious part of their decision making, it influenced the outcomes for some students. Some stated that race was not considered when disciplining students and that all students were disciplined the same based on the school policies, rules, or infraction. Although the participants did not use the phrase “color blind,” some

of their responses confirmed this thought process in that, by not considering the race of a student, they were in fact being fair toward the student. The exact opposite of fairness is not taking a student's background and race into consideration. Color blindness and ignoring race do not address inequality and disadvantages faced by students, but actually maintain the status quo. The color blind concept as it relates to student discipline has contributed to the fact that African American students are disciplined, suspended, and expelled at a higher rate than any other group of students for the same or lesser infractions (DeMatthews, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2017). DeMatthews (2016) called for a challenge to the color blind interpretation of policies and practices to get at the core of the discipline problems in schools. School leaders must question school organization and structure that maintain racism (DeMatthews, 2016). Educators tend to avoid race and not acknowledge their own prejudices. Administrators often make decisions to refer students to the office and suspend for minor offenses because there is a lack of cultural understanding and relationships between school officials and the students whom they serve (Garibaldi, 1992, as cited in Townsend, 2000).

This study focused on the effect of the disciplinary practices of school administrators on the educational trajectory of African American students. The CRT framework challenges the mindset of administrators. Exclusionary discipline and the discipline gap are related to CRT. There is a system hierarchy in schools that determines who is at the top and who is at the bottom (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Until this hierarchy is challenged by school site administrators, there will continue to be a widening discipline gap. The third tenet of CRT points out that, because the experiences of African Americans are not validated within the mainstream culture, it is difficult to eradicate racism (Harper et al., 2009). Policies will not be effective if adversarial attitudes toward African American students do not change. Bell (2005) urged that, although race

will always be part of American life, work is needed to improve the plight of historically excluded groups.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Twelve of the 15 participants exhibited the characteristic of culturally responsive school leadership and noted in their responses that they must be cognizant of a student's background and how it influences the school experience. Culturally responsive school leadership was a theoretical framework used to examine the lived experiences of administrators in determining disciplining practices for African American student and the effect of those decisions on the educational trajectory of African American students. The six interview questions asked of the school site administrators were reflective of culturally responsive school leadership practices. School culture rests on the presumption that all stakeholders in schools have prejudices and biases that they must work to overcome in order to view students differently (Khalifa, 2018; Terrell et al., 2018).

Gay (2002) highlighted the importance of culturally responsive teaching and the fact that, if teachers should examine their classroom practices, then school leaders should do the same. School leadership is critical to school reform, second only to teaching in the classroom (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive school leaders have a welcoming school environment that is accepting of minority students, enabling them to learn in an environment that is free from oppression (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). The school site administrators who were interviewed in this study expressed a desire to create a welcoming school environment for students and families and to exhibit efforts to develop culturally responsive school environments to support African American students. Not all the administrators described in detail how they would create culturally responsive schools reflective of the communities that they serve.

The participant administrators discussed the necessity of creating emotionally safe environments for minority students in order for them to be successful in school. The research findings supported the critical need for culturally responsive school leadership in order to create schools that are successful for all students. In order to create a culturally responsive school environment, school leaders must incorporate the values of the community (Khalifa, 2018; Kalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2009). The findings indicate a need for creating culturally responsive school environments to reduce the discipline gap in schools. Culturally responsive school leadership is critical for school site administrators to recognize their major influence on student achievement. Eighty percent of these school site administrators agreed that culturally responsive school leadership is an important part of their school environment and should be in place so that African American students can be successful in school.

Culturally Relevant Discipline

A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) examined culturally relevant pedagogy to understand how it relates to discipline in the school environment. CRD looks at how school, community, and society contribute to discipline problems in schools (Gay, 2006; A. Gregory & Mosley, 2004; Weinstein et al., 2004). A student's background influences teachers' and administrators' perceptions. African American students receive more punitive consequences even when students of other races exhibit the same behaviors (Monroe, 2005; Monroe & Obidah, 2004). Students need to feel physically and emotionally safe to perform well academically and to behave in school (Gay, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

All participant administrators acknowledged that they recognize that they have the ability to implement culturally responsive discipline due to their ability to exercise discretion in discipline decision making that impacts African American students. In culturally responsive

discipline, cultural differences of students must be considered when applying discipline practices. School administrators must build cultural awareness to recognize how their expectations for student behavior are influenced by their perceptions (White et al., 2005). When administrators are not aware of cultural differences regarding behavioral issues, they can create a school where discipline is at the center of conflict among students, administrators, and families (Findlay, 2012, 2015; A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

The administrators recognized their authority of discretion in school discipline, which supports the connection to the theoretical framework that CRD has the ability to close the discipline gap. If administrators choose to use their authority to recognize, learn about, and understand cultural differences, they can create schools where behavioral issues are resolved based on the best consequences that suit the student infraction, versus decisions based on past practices, stereotypes, prejudices, and race. The key is for administrators to exercise CRD to negotiate new cultural norms for making discipline decisions.

Implications for Practice

School site administrators are charged with making discretionary discipline decisions that affect the educational trajectory of African American students. The study revealed awareness among participant administrators of their duty to examine all aspects of student infractions prior to making decisions that appear to be based on race. Administrators should look at student infractions and consider the whole child prior to applying administrative decisions. The findings in this study could provide insight into administrator awareness, educate administrators, incorporate change in discipline practices, and improve the culture of schools. The findings imply that administrators have used their discretionary decision making authority in school

discipline to apply discipline policies, practices, and procedures that have impacted the lives of students, and African American students in particular.

Many previous studies have focused on classroom teachers and the need for culturally responsive instruction and application of culturally responsive school discipline. Literature was found to support how the decisions of administrators greatly affect discipline because administrators make the actual discipline decisions after information from teachers and school site employees is reviewed by the administrator. More studies are necessary on administrators' perceptions of their direct role in school discipline. Administrators have authority on their campus to administer discipline and set the culture for their schools. Although most of the administrators in this study spoke of their position and authority, some still viewed their role as a byproduct of what teachers and students do versus their ability to shape policy, influence discipline decisions, and create a culturally responsive school environment.

The findings in this study will alert school site administrators, teachers, educational leaders, and parents to (a) perceived inequalities in the application of school discipline, (b) the impact of discipline on the educational trajectory of students, and (c) the importance of applying culturally responsive school leadership practices to improve the school environment for African American students.

Significance of the Study to Educational Leadership

The literature on historical discipline practices that affect African American students, the examination of school policies, discretion in administrator decision making, and the impact of exclusionary discipline on African American students all indicated factors that point to a racial discipline gap in the educational system that is sustained by the disciplinary practices and discretionary decision making of school site administrators. A. Gregory and Mosley (2004)

reported a correlation between the achievement gap and the discipline gap and noted that discipline decisions were often based on an analysis of racial interpretations. The perceptions, opinions, ideas, and beliefs of the participants in this study could be relevant to others in educational leadership positions to examine how they make discretionary discipline decisions as they relate to African American students and their trajectory in school.

The findings of this study are significant to educational leaders to provide information, knowledge, and insight into the views of school site administrators in a TK–12th-grade urban school district as expressed through their lived experiences. The findings support the need for a focus on culturally responsive school leadership and a focus on how culture influences student performance and how students behave in school.

The literature reported that discretion in administrator decision making is based on perceptions, order, and rules with respect to maintaining a standardized system of school (Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Findlay, 2015). In theory, this system should be based on rational and neutral facts, but it is not. School site administrators apply a broad application; thus, almost every decision contains a measure of discretions (Findlay, 2012, 2015). The findings from the study will be useful for educators and educational leaders in public school education to reflect on their educational practices and the impact on African American students. Although the study focused on the lived experiences of 15 administrators in one TK–12th-grade school district in southern California, the experiences are reflective of school administrators throughout the nation. The findings from the study may be used to educate leaders regarding the impact that their decisions have on the trajectory of students for their future beyond high school. African American students should be given the opportunity to excel in all areas of education, without unsubstantiated stereotypes and unwarranted perceptions that limit their opportunities.

The information gained from this study will provide insight to school organizations on the lived experiences of administrators related to their disciplinary practices and their impact on the educational trajectory of African American students. The decisions made by administrators have a level of discretion that must be examined by school leaders to ensure that they are creating environments that are culturally responsive to the needs of students.

Recommendations for Practice

Research for more than 40 years has documented racial disparity in American schools. There has been an increase in exclusionary discipline practices that negatively impact African American students more than any other race of students. If schools and school leaders are to remove the discipline gap, there must be intentional effort made to examine policies, practices, application of discipline, and the culture of schools that is not equitable for all students.

It is important to examine the discipline gap in the context of race. Historians would say that to answer questions of society about a lack of equity requires critical analysis of race. CRT provides a lens through which to examine how race impacts every aspect of life for African Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). A. Gregory and Mosely (2004) examined the context of race and how race influences discipline in schools. Policies such as zero tolerance must be examined to evaluate their application across racial lines.

Teachers and administrators often seek to be color blind versus color conscious, which is counterproductive to students and the application of equitable discipline. Policies should be put in place that make it difficult for administrators to suspend students for infractions that are discretionary in nature and based on judgment. There have been agreements between school agencies to limit filing criminal charges against students for minor infractions; instead, those students are referred for counseling and support services (Armour, 2015).

In order to examine policies and the application of school discipline, there needs to be training for school educators focusing on culturally responsive school leadership that leads to CRD. When schools are disconnected from the communities that they serve, there is an increase in exclusionary practices that widen the discipline and academic gaps for minority students (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016, Theoharis, 2009; Welsh et al., 1999). School leaders cannot hide behind neutrality. Culturally responsive school leaders promote a school climate that meets the needs of parents and teachers within a cultural context (Theoharis, 2009). CRD looks at school discipline and how schools, communities, and society contribute to discipline problems (Gay, 2006; A. Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Weinstein et al., 2004). In order for students to engage actively in learning and participate in school, they must feel physically and emotionally safe (Gay, 2006; Ladson-Billing, 2006).

Recommendations for Future Research

There is extensive literature focusing on the inequities in disciplining minority students, in particular African American students. Most of the literature focuses on teacher referrals, student infractions, and policies. There is a gap in the literature regarding the disciplining decision-making authority of school site administrators. This study focused on the lived experiences of administrators in one school district. Similar studies should be conducted in other school districts to understand the perceptions of administrators regarding the disciplinary practices that affect the educational trajectory of African American students.

It would be of interest to capture the perceptions of the district level administrators regarding discipline decisions made at the school site level and the impact it has on the discipline gap. District level administrators who supervise schools and or oversee student service departments could be interviewed and district data could be added to quantify the findings.

In this study, the race of the participants was collected but the responses were not categorized by race. An interesting future research would be to examine the lived experiences of administrators based on their race in determining disciplinary practices that affect the educational trajectory of African American students.

A phenomenological design extracts the lived experiences of participants but it does not capture quantitative information. A mixed-methods study could bring in quantitative data to validate the interview responses of participants and bring credibility to their responses. There were 15 participants involved in this study; a broader participant base could facilitate a more in-depth study of administrator responses. Surveys could be given to capture a broader participant group and then interviews could be conducted based on participant responses to deepen the study. Recommendations for future research include involving more school districts, involving more participants, examining the information based on the race of the participants, utilizing surveys, and adding quantitative data to strengthen the information.

Conclusion

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of administrators and the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. The research was conducted to describe the lived experiences that influence the perceptions, opinions, ideas, and beliefs of a small sample of the population. The lived experiences of school site administrators in a TK–12th-grade urban school district were analyzed, revealing seven emergent themes: (a) policies, rules, and procedures; (b) biases related to school discipline; (c) administrator discretion in discipline decisions; (d) participant impact on students; (e) participant impact on African American students; (f) influence of race on discipline decisions, and (g) culturally responsive school leadership.

Interviews were conducted to collect participants' responses to six interview questions to address the central research questions, *What is the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students?* Participants shared information related to seven core themes to convey their lived experiences as school site administrators. The identified themes of policies, rules, and procedures, biases related to school discipline, administrator discretion in discipline decisions, participant impact on students, participant impact on African American students, influence of race on discipline decisions and culturally responsive school leadership may provide awareness of the participant's perceptions of the effect of administrators' disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students. Raising awareness of administrators' perceptions can help to eliminate administrator biases and support culturally responsive school leadership and culturally relevant school discipline for all students, regardless of race.

The conclusion of this study is that school site administrators must be aware of the authority that they possess as it applies to discretionary decision making regarding disciplinary practices that affect the trajectory of African American students. Administrators, particularly principals, contribute to the discipline gap as they make determinations about exclusionary discipline and other student placement (De Matthews et al., 2017; Honig, 2004). Because almost every decision in administration involves a level of discretion, it is important that administrators examine their personal biases, stereotypes, and misperceptions regarding African American students in order to administer discipline fairly and to begin to close the racial discipline gap. The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights reported that during the 2015-2016 school year, African American students were three times more likely to be suspended for the same or lesser offenses committed in school by their White counterparts (DeMatthews et al.,

2017; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). According to DeMatthews et al. (2017), “Race is a critical variable informing student disciplinary decisions particularly for principals, who hold considerable power to alter the trajectory of students’ lives” (p. 520).

African American students are disproportionately disciplined in American schools when compared to other races. The literature on the history of school discipline, examination of school policies, discretion in administrator decision making, and the impact of exclusionary discipline on African American students reviewed in Chapter 2 showed a direct correlation between administrators’ disciplinary practices and the effect of these decisions and practices on the educational trajectory of African American students.

Summary

In this research study that explored the effect of administrators’ disciplinary practices on the educational trajectory of African American students, the participants revealed common experiences. The participants were generally caring school site administrators who expressed love for students, education, and doing what is best for all students. Some participants did not always see themselves as the main decision makers in student discipline at their school sites. The sometimes relinquished authority to rules with which they did not always agree, past practices, and staff members who had differing ideas regarding student discipline, specifically the disciplining of African American students. The administrators talked very little about specifically working to change teacher and staff behavior toward more equitable practices, although they desired to create more inclusive school environments. Some administrators expressed that they believed in equity and culturally responsive school leadership but did not always see themselves as able to influence those beliefs in fellow staff members. They acknowledged that race played a role in the disciplinary practices and decisions that affect African American students. Most of the

administrators in the study viewed themselves as culturally responsive school leaders who were aware of the inequalities in the school system, and they wanted to do their part in making school more accessible to African American students.

School site administrators must recognize their influence as disciplinary decision makers and their important role in altering the racial discipline gap in most schools in America. The thoughts and attitudes of school leaders set the tone for educational practices at the school site, as well as school discipline. School leaders must build awareness of their own cultural beliefs and values in order to recognize how their expectations for student behavior are influenced by their own perceptions, thoughts, and actions (White et al., 2005). Administrators must require that all employees raise their level of cultural awareness as it relates to the students whom they serve by providing specific staff development focusing on overcoming conscious and unconscious biases toward students. School site administrators have great influence and can shift inequitable practices related to the persistent discipline gap in schools that impact the educational trajectory of African American students.

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Appendix A

Letter to Superintendent

October, 2019

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]:

I am writing to request permission to conduct interviews with school site principals and assistant principals within the [REDACTED] Unified School District for the purpose of completing my research study. The qualitative phenomenological study will explore the lived experiences of administrators in disciplining African American students and the role it plays in determining the academic trajectory of African American students.

The interviews will be conducted over the next eight to ten weeks with administrators at the elementary, middle and high school levels. The interviews will take approximately one hour to complete and will not be conducted during work hours. The interviews will take place at a time and location convenient for the administrators. Also, I am requesting permission to conduct interviews at the administrator's school site after work hours if they would prefer to meet at their work location.

The identity of the administrators, district, and school sites will not be reported in the research study. Administrator participation in the study is voluntary. The summary of the findings of the study will be provided to participants and interested parties at the conclusion of the study.

If you agree, please sign the attached form and return the form to me acknowledging your consent and permission to conduct interviews involving school site administrators within the [REDACTED] Unified School District.

Thank you so much for your assistance in helping me to complete this important research that will benefit the educational community.

Sincerely,

Rhea McIver Gibbs

Rhea McIver Gibbs

Doctoral Candidate

University of Redlands

cc: [REDACTED]

Appendix B
District Consent

October 9, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Rhea McIver-Gibbs permission to conduct the research titled *The Experiences of Administrators in Determining Disciplining Practices for African American Students* within the [REDACTED] Unified School District. I understand that Rhea McIver-Gibbs will send a request to participate in the study to 54 principals and assistant principals in the [REDACTED] Unified School District. Mrs. McIver-Gibbs will recruit 10-15 principals and assistant principals to conduct interviews over the next eight to ten weeks. We have agreed to the following research study procedures.

- Interviews will be conducted over eight to ten weeks with principals and assistant principals at the elementary, middle and high school levels.
- The interviews will not take place during the work hours of the employees.
- The interviews will take place at the school site of the participants in the [REDACTED] Unified School District or at the [REDACTED] Unified School District office located at [REDACTED].
- If the participants choose not to be interviewed at their school site or at the district office, the interviews will take place at the local Starbucks.
- The interviews will take approximately one hour each to complete.
- The identity of the administrators, school sites, and school district will not be reported in the research study.
- Results of the research study will be provided upon request to participants and interested parties via email/mail at the conclusion of the study.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

Respectfully,

Superintendent of Schools

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board Approval

IRB DECISION LETTER

October 28, 2019

Rhea McIver-Gibbs
SofE
University of Redlands
Redlands, CA 92373-0999

Dear Rhea:

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: The experiences of administrators in determining disciplining...

DATE OF REVIEW: 10/28/2019

DECISION: Approved

IRB APPROVAL #: 2019-52-REDLANDS

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your revised project by the University of Redlands Institutional Review Board (IRB).

You are authorized to begin conducting this study as of Date of Final Approval: **10/28/2019**. This approval is Valid Until: **10/28/2020**.

Please note the following conditions attached to all approval letters.

1. This project must be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the University's IRB Guidelines and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46). These federal regulations are available online at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/documents/OHRPRegulations.pdf>.
2. You must notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the status of your research project.
3. You should report to the IRB any anticipated problems involving risks to the participants.
4. No participants may be involved in any study before the Date of Final Approval or after the Valid until date.
5. Upon completion of the project, please submit a final report to the IRB. The form is on the IRB website.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Chair at Jessica_hehman@redlands.edu. A signed copy of this letter is on-file.

Sincerely,

Jessica Hehman

Chair, IRB

FWA 00023072

Appendix D
Introductory Letter

November 2019

Dr., Mr. or Ms. XXXX XXXXXX
[REDACTED]

Dear Dr., Mr. or Ms. XXXXXX:

This fall I would like to conduct research for my dissertation within the [REDACTED] Unified School District with the intention of acquiring valuable information that may be used to better serve students, administrators, and teachers.

A qualitative phenomenological research study will explore the lived experiences of administrators in disciplining African American students and the perceived role it may play in determining the trajectory of African American students.

I will conduct open-ended interviews with principals and assistant principals concerning their perceptions on discipline practices at the elementary, middle, and high school levels focusing on African American students. A total of 10 to 15 principals and assistant principals will participate in the research study. I would like to gain insight regarding current discipline practices and policies instituted by administrators in a school setting related to African American students. The study will also attempt to determine if the perceptions of administrators are consistent with published research on school discipline practices that impact African American students.

The interviews will take no more than one hour and will be conducted at a time and location convenient to the participant after work hours. The identity of the participant, school site, and district will not be reported in the study. Participation in the study is voluntary. A summary of the research findings will be provided by email/mail delivery upon request following the completion of the study.

I am seeking your participation in the research which will produce valuable information in the field of education as it particularly relates to school administrators discipline decisions that may impact the trajectory of African American students in school. If you are interested in participating in the study or have any questions, please contact me at [REDACTED] or email me at rhea_mciver-gibbs@redlands.edu.

Sincerely,

Rhea McIver-Gibbs, Doctoral Candidate – University of Redlands

Appendix E
Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

(For use with adult subjects only)

What follows is a consent form that explains what will be happening if you choose to participate in this research study. The first section (Investigator Information) should have been completed by the investigator. If this section is incomplete, do not continue with the study. Do not participate if this study has not been assigned an IRB approval number. The information you need to provide begins on Page 2. Please read each section carefully.

Investigator Information (to be completed by Principle Investigator)

IRB approval number: 2019-52-REDLANDS

Title of project: The Experiences of Administrators in Determining Disciplining Practices for African American Students

Name of principle investigator (PI): Rhea McIver-Gibbs

Email of PI: rhea_mciver-gibbs@redlands.edu

Telephone number of PI:

Department or major of PI: Ed.D School of Education

Position held by PI:

☐ faculty

☐ administrator/staff

☒ student

If PI is a student or staff, complete the remainder of Investigator Information, otherwise go to next page.

Name of faculty or administrator sponsor: Dr. Nicol R. Howard

Department or office of sponsor: Department of Teaching and Learning, School of Education

Position held by

sponsor:

☒ faculty

☐ administrator

General information about this study

You have been invited to participate in a study being conducted by Rhea McIver-Gibbs at the University of Redlands in Redlands, California. This research study is independent of the [REDACTED] Unified School District. Employees of the district will not be required to participate, or you may stop participating at any time for any reason without any penalty or adverse action taken against you.

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of school site administrators (principals and assistant principals) in determining disciplining practices for African American students and the perception of these decisions on the trajectory of African American students.

You are being asked to participate in this study that will interview 10-15 school site administrators (principals and assistant principals) to gain valuable information that may be used to inform policies and practices related to disciplining African American students.

Reasons why you should not participate in this study

There are two possible risks that have been taken into consideration regarding this study:

1. First, having a person discuss discipline decisions you make as an administrator may be distressing. Therefore, the questions asked during the interview are not at a level of intensity that will create undue stress. However, if you feel uncomfortable with a particular question during the interview, you have the right not to answer the question, ask the researcher to take a break, move on, terminate your involvement in the interview, or withdraw from the study. The researcher will also listen for signs of distress and will check your willingness to continue the conversation if any anxiety is detected.
2. Secondly, during the course of the interview, your responses will be audio recorded to ensure your accounts of your lived experiences are accurately transcribed and documented. Participants must be comfortable with their responses being audio recorded, no personal identifiable information will be asked, and all participants will be assigned a participant number for reference of collected data.

How long this will take (i.e., duration of participation)

Your participation in this study will take approximately one hour to complete the interview. This does not include the time to review the interview transcript which could take an additional 30 minutes after the completion of the transcription. The researcher will arrange a time for the participant to review their transcript.

What will happen if you participate in this study

If you participate in this study you will be asked one-on-one, face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interview questions regarding your lived experiences determining disciplining decisions for African American students and the perception of these decisions on the trajectory of African American students.

Audiotaping

Your responses will be audiotaped for accuracy.

Protecting your privacy

All information will only be reported as group data with no identifying information. Participants will be assigned a participant number for reference of collected data. All the information gathered from the study, will be kept in a secure location and only those directly involved with the research will have access to the transcripts. The participant's name, school site and school district will not be reported in the findings. The research documentation will be destroyed after a period of two (2) years.

Although every effort will be made to keep the research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is unlikely to happen, but if disclosure is required, the investigator will take whatever steps are allowable by law to protect the privacy of your personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University of Redlands, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

What will happen if you experience any problems or discomforts during or after your participation

It is possible that there are unknown risks or discomforts. Please report any problems immediately to the researcher.

Anything you do, including participating in research, carries with it some chance that something problematic or unwanted may happen. The following are possible risks associated with this study:

Please report any problems immediately to the researcher. Although the researcher may direct you to medical, psychological, or other services, any costs related to such problems are yours or your insurance company's responsibility.

Questions about the study

You may ask and have answered any question regarding this research. If you have any further questions or concerns please contact the Principle Investigator (PI) Rhea McIver-Gibbs at [REDACTED] or rhea_mciver-gibbs@redlands.edu.

Questions or concerns about the investigators, staff members, and your participation in the study

This study is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Nicol R. Howard from the University of Redlands, School of Education. She can be contacted at [REDACTED] or nhoward@redlands.edu. This study was approved by the University of Redlands Institutional Review Board (IRB). This board tries to ensure that your rights and welfare are protected if you choose to participate in the study. If you have any questions about your role or how you were treated by the research personnel, you may contact the Chair of the IRB at jessica_hehman@redlands.edu or by telephone at [REDACTED].

Participant's Agreement

I, _____,

Print Name Above

have read the information presented above. I have asked all questions I had at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed agreement.

Signature of Research Participant	Date

To be completed by researcher:

Print Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

Appendix F
Interview Questions

- What criteria do you use to discipline students?
- Are those criteria applied differently to different groups of students or in different situations? If so, tell me more about those groups of students or situations.
- How do you perceive your discipline practices impact the trajectory of students?
- Do you think your discipline decisions impact one group of students more than another?
If so, what group(s)?
- How do you perceive your discipline practices impact the trajectory of African American students?
- How do you perceive the influence of race on discipline decisions?

Appendix G
Debriefing Form

Debriefing Form

Thank you for participating in today's interview concerning your lived experiences as an administrator in determining disciplining practices for African American students. The intent of the interview today was to acquire valuable information that may be used to better inform administrative practices and policies related to the discipline decisions made by administrators that are perceived to impact the trajectory of African American students.

Thank you for your participation in this interview. All the information we collected in today's interview will be confidential, and there will be no way of identifying your responses. I am not interested in any one individual's responses, rather the general patterns that emerge when the data is aggregated together.

If you know of any friends or acquaintances that are eligible to participate in this study, I request that you do not discuss the research study with them until after they have had the opportunity to participate. Prior knowledge of questions asked during the study can impact the validity of the research findings and conclusions. I greatly appreciate your cooperation.

If you have any further questions after participating in the interview process, please contact the researcher, Rhea McIver-Gibbs at [REDACTED] or rhea_mciver-gibbs@redlands.edu. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Nicol Howard from the University of Redlands, School of Education. Dr. Howard can be contacted at [REDACTED] or nhoward@redlands.edu. In addition, this study was approved by the University of Redlands Institutional Review Board (IRB). This board ensures that your rights and welfare are protected if you choose to participate in the study. If you have any questions about your role or how you were treated by the researcher, you may contact the Chair of the IRB at jessica_hehman@redlands.edu or by telephone at [REDACTED].

If you are feeling distressed and are unable to contact a person associated with this study, please contact the [REDACTED] Unified School District Risk Management Department at [REDACTED] for counseling referral services free of charge and/or covered by your health care insurance.

Thank you again for your participation.

If you would like to learn more about this research topic, I suggest the following references:

Findlay, N. M. (2015). Discretion in student discipline: Insight into elementary principals' decision making. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51, 472-507.

Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 59-68.

Khalifa, M. A. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34, 317-342.

Townsend, B. L. (2000). The disproportionate discipline of African American learners: Reducing school suspensions and expulsions. *Exceptional Children*, 66(3), 381-391.