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The Cost of Color in Public Education – An Examination of Disproportionate Suspensions

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Introduction

A decade of research on school discipline has made society keenly aware of the “elephant in the room.” Overwhelmingly, Black students are “wounded” permanently when they are suspended over and over for offenses that are overlooked when their white counterparts commit the same infraction. Since Black students are suspended frequently, where do they go during the day? They revert back to their neighborhoods where supervision is scarce; ultimately, many of these suspended Black students commit crimes that eventually introduce them to the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The focus of this study is to investigate why Black students are suspended more than white students are in a rural high school in the center of North Carolina. Skiba and Sprague (2008) indicate that out-of-school suspensions may have adverse effects on student outcomes and the learning climate. Because suspensions are disproportionately issued to minority students, some researchers believe that minority students are segregated based on discipline, and are thus denied equal protection under the 14th Amendment (Skiba et al., 2011). Research suggests that suspensions have a limited effect on the behavior modification and stifles student achievement (Fenning et al., 2012; Michail, 2011; Teasley & Miller, 2011).

Significance of the Study

This study may benefit not only my school system but also other school systems, which may create or revise policies based upon the results. Administrators may even decide to implement similar alternatives to suspension programs in their school district. Teachers may use this study to reflect on their own practices in districts across the state. To effectively learn, a student must have a highly qualified teacher who has excellent classroom management skills. Teachers have tremendous influence on their students’ academic successes. Teachers with effective classroom management skills can increase students’ academic engagement and

decrease challenging behaviors. However, many teachers are still ineffective in managing their classrooms and have not been trained adequately to deal with students' challenging behaviors (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010).

Background Literature

School Discipline

Historically, schools used corporal punishment and humiliation as necessary to control the behavior of unruly students. It is not uncommon to hear grandparents and great grandparents refer to "paddling" as the panacea for all discipline problems. Corporal punishment is perceived as the norm within many Black families. Some research indicates Black Children are spanked more frequently than other ethnic groups (Straus & Stewart, 1998). Unlike White parenting styles, Black parenting styles include the use of authoritarian methods that exhibit lower warmth and more physical discipline while commanding respect from their Children (Hill & Tyson, 2008; Jackson-Newsom, Buchanan, & McDonald, 2008; Weis & Toolis, 2010). Many states and school systems have ventured away from corporal punishment for zero tolerance policies that have a "net-widening effect" on school discipline (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006, p. 127).

Teachers and administrators suggest that freeing the school of disruptive behaviors increases achievement for the vast majority of students. Educational leaders embrace zero-tolerance policies in the belief that they provide the greatest good for the greatest number. The problems are when students are out of school; they are learning outside of the school curriculum. What happens to Children who have been expelled can have negative implications on the entire community.

Currently, school disciplinary practices usually consist of negative consequences for the students such as warnings, student-teacher conferences, parent phone calls, parent-teacher conferences, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions (Osher et al., 2010). These practices are considered the Band-Aid approach until a bigger problem exists. Moreover, there is little

evidence to support the effectiveness of suspensions (Mayer, 1995; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). With the inception of zero tolerance policies, school systems have implemented predetermined consequences for students, despite the seriousness of the offense, and many have also added school police (resources officers) to assist in enforcing the discipline policies (Skiba et al., 2006). The severity of the offenses has led to an increase in students being charged by the school resource officers instead of being disciplined by school administrators (Wald & Losen, 2003). In light of the negative consequences associated with exclusionary practices, racial disparities in discipline suggests students from some groups are at even greater risk for negative outcomes relative to students from other groups (Carter, 2014).

Educators must be trained in behavior management, including “culturally responsive” classroom management and instruction, and principals need to work with teachers to define which offenses should be referred to the office for further disciplinary action (Gay, 2002). According to Gay, it is important for teachers to not only learn about the topics discussed in their classroom but also to understand the cultural characteristics and contributions of the different cultural groups represented therein

Racial Inconsistencies in School Discipline

Skiba et al. (2002) found that White students were punished for relatively more objective offenses that, taken together, could be considered rule breaking in nature, such as smoking, vandalism, leaving school without permission, and using obscene language. Black and Latino students, on the other hand, were punished primarily for offenses that Skiba et al. (2002) considered to be subjective and that constituted a challenge to authority or established procedures such as loitering, disrespect, excessive noise, and threat. More recent studies have found that Black students are more likely than White students to receive disciplinary referrals for defiance (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) and for noncompliance (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

School suspensions and expulsions are applied inconsistently across schools and school districts (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). This results in inequities when handing down

suspensions to students. This inconsistency appears to be connected as much to classroom, school, and principal characteristics, as to students. It is often assumed that in-school and out of school suspensions are reserved for offenses such as fighting that jeopardize school safety; however, schools use suspension in response to a wide range of behaviors, including tardiness, disruptive behavior, non-compliance, and insubordination. Only a small percentage of suspensions actually occur in response to behaviors that threaten school safety or security (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

Black males are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their white peers (Brewster, Stephenson, & Beard, 2013). This causes them to lose valuable instructional time, which can depress their academic performance, increase the risk that they will repeat a grade, and escalate the likelihood that they will drop out of school (Brewster et al., 2013). Black males are often suspended or expelled for minor or discretionary offenses like being tardy or using their cellphones (Brewster et al., 2013). Black students represent:

- 18% of all students;
- 35% of students suspended once,
- 46% of those suspended multiple times, and
- 39% of all students expelled (Brewster et al., 2013).

A 2011 National Education Policy Center study found that Black students were more likely than White students to be suspended for infractions such as cell-phone use and public displays of affection, while another study based on student self-reports found that White girls reported that they were suspended for infractions such as chewing gum or not changing for gym class (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Males of color have higher rates of disciplinary referrals and expulsions/suspensions because they have more serious and more frequent breaches of behavioral standards (Kinsler, 2011; Ferguson, 2006).

Research affirms the theoretical construct of discipline as relational (Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Skiba & Williams, 2014). A positive teacher-student relationship is associated with positive behavioral and academic outcomes for students (Brinkworth & Gehlbach, in press). Teachers who are perceived by students as being fair and equitable and who have more positive relationships with their students are more likely to generate compliance with their authority; thus, their students exhibit less defiance and uncooperative behavior (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Dunbar & Taylor, 1982; Way, 2011; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1998).

Impact of Poverty on School Discipline

Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined as the social position of a student, which is established by both the social and financial domains of the student's parent(s). In most cases, SES is determined by the parents' educational level, employment status, and income. Considine and Zappala (2002) concluded that students from low SES families are more likely to exhibit the following educational outcomes:

- lower levels of literacy, numeracy, and comprehensions;
- higher retention rates;
- lower percentages attending college;
- higher numbers of behavior problems;
- higher levels of negative attitudes school; and
- lower rates of success in the work force.

Many studies have evaluated the interconnection between exclusionary discipline and socioeconomic variables. These researchers have sought to explain the existence of the discipline gap from a socioeconomic perspective, utilizing the basic premise that students of low socioeconomic status, regardless of ethnicity, have an increased risk of being negatively impacted by the school discipline system (Skiba et al, 1997; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Many political organizations have latched onto this framework for explaining the discipline gap in an

attempt to avoid accusations that schools use discipline in a racially discriminatory manner (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000, as cited in Skiba et al., 2002).

On average, Black children enter kindergarten with less preparedness in pre-reading, pre-math, and behavioral skills than do White students (Farkas, 2003). Factors such as poverty, poor diet, coming to school hungry, and substandard schools have contributed to the unfortunate circumstance of low achievement among Black students in low-income, urban areas (Spring, 2008; Tinsley Li, Nussbaum, & Richards, 2007; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). When Children have to worry about their next meal or live in violent communities, focusing on schoolwork becomes an issue (Thomas et al., 2012).

Killion (1998) advocates that alternative schools and Saturday schools are the most effective consequences assigned to students for discipline problems. Conversely, Sprague et al. (2001) investigated other intervention programs for student discipline problems but determined that school-wide discipline programs had minimal improvement on the number of office discipline referrals, school-wide discipline, and school safety. Schools with a high number of low SES students and a high number of minority students are strong indicators for high student suspension rates (Christle et al., 2004).

Adverse Effects on Student Outcomes

In-school and out-of-school suspensions leave youth on the streets without supervision and deprived of opportunities to further their development (Unidos & Unidos, 2005). Zero tolerance and school discipline policies have created a number of problems for students, schools, parents, and communities, including:

- denial of education through increased suspension and expulsion rates;
- lower test scores;
- higher drop-out rates; and, in some cases,
- racial profiling (Unidos & Unidos, 2005).

Suspensions have been shown to be associated with a number of health and social problems (Dupper, 2010). To illustrate, students who are not in school are more likely to have lower rates of academic achievement, to smoke, and to use substances such as alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine (Dupper, 2010). They are also more likely to engage in sexual intercourse, to be involved in fights, carry a weapon, and commit crimes (Dupper, 2010).

The high rate of out-of-school suspended students indicates that out-of-school suspension does not work; in fact, for some students it perpetuates inappropriate behavior (Unidos & Unidos, 2005). These policies have created additional problems such as increases in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. In schools across the county this approach does not promote school safety or academic success but rather:

- Removing a student from school appears to predict higher rates of future misbehavior.
- Schools with higher rates of suspension and expulsion have less satisfactory ratings of school climate.
- Zero tolerance is associated with an adverse impact on individual and school-wide academic performance.
- Suspension and expulsion are associated with a higher likelihood of school dropout.
- Suspension and expulsion increase the likelihood that the youth will enter the criminal justice system (Youth United for Change and Advancement Project, 2011).

Methods

Participants

In total, 78 out of 130 senior students met the age requirement for this study. Out of the 78, a total of 36 senior students voluntarily agreed to participate. This represented a 46% response rate. The effective sample size (n) was 36. The certified teaching staff from Gates High School was also invited to participate in the survey. Of the 39 teachers, twenty-seven

responded. The response rate for teachers was 69%. The sample size (n) was 27. The Focus Group consisted of 4 male school administrators; one from the central office, two assistant principals and one principal.

Instruments

For this study, student and teacher survey questions will be answered using a Likert Scale ranging from one to four Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3 and, Strongly Agree = 4 (Gay, 1996). The researcher chose the four Likert Scale to force the respondents to make a decision. Using a five or seven Likert Scale would have given the respondents an opportunity to remain neutral. The researcher used Microsoft Excel Data Tools to analyze the data from the aforementioned survey. Descriptive statistics, Chi-square, were calculated for each item (Gay, 1996). The researcher chose to use mirroring questions for the student and teacher respondents in order to establish a valid outcome. Therefore, the researcher calculated Chi-squared analyses for each item, which tested “whether the perceptions among the two mutually groups,” Students and Teachers, were significantly different (Gay, 1996, p. 145).

The Chi-square is a significant investigation instrument that provided impressive data about research information. It requires no assumptions about the shape of the population distribution from which the sample was drawn. The research hypothesis asserts that the variables are related in the population; the null hypothesis asserts that they are not related in the population. The Chi-square sampling distributions depend on the degrees of freedom (Blair, 1985).

Quantitative Summary

The null hypothesis was that there is no difference between the survey respondents between the students at Gates High School versus the teachers at Gate High School. Chi-square was used to compare the responses from both groups. The first of twenty statements used in this analysis identified the commonality and gaps between the views of students and teachers on the first statement: “My school respects races and cultures.” As

reported in Table 4.1, the Chi statistic of 0.129 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of .05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841 therefore, there was not a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. This means that the students and teachers agreed with a high percentage that their school respects races and cultures. This rate is very desirable.

Table 4.1

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement One:

	<i>My School Respects Races and Cultures</i>	
	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	75.78% (28)	81.48% (22)
Disagree	22.22% (8)	18.52% (5)
		Chi Statistic 0.129
		Chi Critical 3.841

As noted in Table 4.2 with regard to Statement Two, "School is supportive and inviting for students to learn," the Chi statistic of 1.50 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. This means that the students and teachers agreed at a high percentage that their school is supportive and inviting for students to learn. A high percentage of teachers and students expressed their belief in the school's respect for race and culture. This rate is very desirable.

Table 4.2

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Two:

School Is Supportive and Inviting for Students to Learn

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>		
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>		
Agree	77.22% (26)	85.19% (23)		
Disagree	22.22% (10)	14.81% (4)		
		Chi Statistic	1.500	
		Chi Critical	3.841	

Table 4.3 represents agreement with the statement “Adults at this school treats all students with respect.” The Chi statistic of 5.281 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. Although more than 50% of students agree the adults treat them with respect, the results are less than desirable.

Table 4.3

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Three:

Adults at This School Treat All Students with Respect

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>		
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>		
Agree	58.33% (21)	85.19% (23)		
Disagree	41.67% (15)	14.81% (4)		
		Chi Statistic	5.281*	
		Chi Critical	3.841	

*Significant difference

In Table 4.4, in regards to the student and teachers’ responses to the statement “Students treat teachers with respect,” the Chi statistic of 18.667 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the

alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. More than 50% of students agree they treat teachers with respect. The results are less than desirable.

Table 4.4

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Four:

Students Treat Teachers with Respect

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	44.44% (16)	96.30% (26)
Disagree	55.56% (20)	3.70% (1)
		Chi Statistic 18.667*
		Chi Critical 3.841

*Significant difference

As reflected in Table 4.5, in regards to the student and teachers' responses to the statement, "School rules are fair," the Chi statistic of 8.842 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. Less than 50% of students agree the school rules are fair. The results are less than desirable.

Table 4.5

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Five:

School Rules Are Fair

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	44.44% (16)	81.48% (22)
Disagree	55.56% (20)	18.52% (5)
		Chi Statistic 8.842*
		Chi Critical 3.841

*Significant difference

As noted in Table 4.6 with regard to the statement, “All students are treated fairly when they break school rules,” the Chi statistic of 2.424 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was not a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. This means that the students and teachers agreed at a high percentage that all students are treated fairly when they break the rules. This rate is very desirable.

Table 4.6

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Six:

All Students Are Treated Fairly When They Break School Rules

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	80.56% (29)	62.96% (17)
Disagree	19.44% (7)	37.04% (10)
		Chi Statistic 2.424
		Chi Critical 3.841

According to Table 4.7, in regards to the student and teachers’ responses to the statement, “this school clearly informs students what would happen if they break school rules,” the Chi statistic of 8.071 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. Only 61% of students agree they treat teachers with respect. The results are less than desirable.

Table 4.7

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Seven:

This School Clearly Informs Students What Would Happen If They

Break School Rules

	GHS Students	GHS Teachers
	% (n)	% (n)
Agree	61.11% (22)	92.59% (25)
Disagree	38.89% (14)	7.41% (2)
		Chi Statistic 8.071*
		Chi Critical 3.841

*Significant difference

In Table 4.8, in regards to the students and teachers' responses to the statement "the rules in this school are too strict," the Chi statistic of 18.667 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. More than 50% of students agree the rules are too strict. The results are less than desirable.

Table 4.8

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Eight:

Are Rules in This School To Strict?

	GHS Students	GHS Teachers
	% (n)	% (n)
Agree	55.56% (20)	3.70% (1)
Disagree	44.44% (16)	96.30% (26)
		Chi Statistic 18.667*
		Chi Critical 3.841

*Significant difference

Table 4.9 illustrates a Chi statistic of 18.667 greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.84; therefore, there was a statistical difference between

the distributions in these two groups regarding the strictness of school rules. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. More than 55% of students view the rules as too strict while less than 4% of teachers view the rules the same. The results are less than desirable.

Table 4.9

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Nine:

It Is Easy for Students to Get Kicked out of Class or Get Suspended

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	61.11% (22)	3.70% (1)
Disagree	38.89% (14)	96.30% (26)
		Chi Statistic 21.936*
		Chi Critical 3.841

* Significant difference

As noted in Table 4.10, in regards to the students and teachers' responses to the statement "students get in trouble for breaking small rules," the Chi statistic of 10.246 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. Over 61% of the students agreed to their peers getting in trouble for breaking small rules. Less than 24% of the teacher agreed with the students.

Table 4.10

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement Ten:

Students Get in Trouble for Breaking Small Rules

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	66.67% (24)	25.93% (7)
Disagree	33.33% (12)	74.07% (20)
		Chi Statistic 10.246*
		Chi Critical 3.841

* Significant difference

As shown in Table 4.11, in regards to the students and teachers' responses to the statement "teachers are very strict here," the Chi statistic of .375 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. This means that the students and teachers agreed at a low percentage of teachers are very strict.

Table 4.11

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 11:

Teachers Are Very Strict Here

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>		
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>		
Agree	25.00% (9)	18.52% (5)		
Disagree	75.00% (27)	81.48% (22)		
		Chi Statistic	.375	
		Chi Critical	3.841	

As revealed in Table 4.12, in regards to students and teachers' responses to the statement "school rules are made clear to students," the Chi statistic of 2.424 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. Although more than 80% of students agree rules are made clear to them, the results are less than desirable.

Table 4.12

*Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 12:
Rules in This School Are Made Clear to Students*

	GHS Students	GHS Teachers		
	% (n)	% (n)		
Agree	80.56% (29)	62.96% (17)		
Disagree	19.44% (7)	37.04% (10)		
		Chi Statistic	2.424	
		Chi Critical	3.841	

Table 4.13 represents the rate of agreement with the statement “This school makes it clear how students are supposed to act.” The Chi statistic of .802 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. Both groups of respondents agreed strongly that the school makes it clear how students are expected to act.

Table 4.13

*Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 13:
This School Makes It Clear How Students Are Expected to Act*

	GHS Students	GHS Teachers		
	% (n)	% (n)		
Agree	80.56% (29)	88.89% (24)		
Disagree	19.44% (7)	11.11% (3)		
		Chi Statistic	.802	
		Chi Critical	3.841	

As observed in Table 4.14, the students and teachers’ responses to the statement “Most of my teacher do not understand what my life is like outside of school,” revealed the Chi statistic of 8.099 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. There is a significant

difference in the agreement of this statement. The students agreed nearly 70% their teachers do not understand their lives outside of school.

Table 4.14

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 14:

Most of My Teachers Do Not Understand What My Life Is Like Outside of School

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>	
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>	
Agree	69.44% (25)	33.33% (9)	
Disagree	30.56% (11)	66.67% (18)	
		Chi Statistic	8.099*
		Chi Critical	3.841

* Significant difference

As evident in Table 4.15, students and teachers' responses to the statement "this school encourages students to feel responsible for how they act," revealed the Chi statistic of .977 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. This is surprising as 75% of the students feel the school encourages them to feel responsible for how they act while 33% of the faculty disagrees.

Table 4.15

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 15:

This School Encourages Students to Feel Responsible for How They Act

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>	
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>	
Agree	75.00% (27)	33.33% (9)	
Disagree	25.00% (9)	66.67% (18)	
		Chi Statistic	.977
		Chi Critical	3.841

Table 4.16 represents the rate of agreement with the statement “I feel that I belong (am accepted and liked) at school.” The Chi statistic of .107 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was no statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the null hypothesis and rejects the alternate. Both respondents agreed strongly that the students belonged and were accepted at Gates High School. This is promising for the school culture and climate.

Table 4.16

Chi Squared: GHS Survey Likert Scale Statement 16:

I Feel that I Belong (Am Accepted and Liked) at School

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>	
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>	
Agree	86.11% (31)	88.89% (24)	
Disagree	13.89% (5)	11.11% (3)	
		Chi Statistic	.107
		Chi Critical	3.841

Table 4.17 illustrates the students and teachers’ responses to the statement “this school encourages students to understand how others think and feel.” The Chi statistic of 5.048 was less than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. Interesting, only 50% of the students believe their school encourages them to understand how others think and feel. Nearly 78% of the teachers believe they are encouraging students to be empathetic.

Table 4.17

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 17:

This School Encourages Students to Understand How Others Think and Feel

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	50.00% (18)	77.78% (21)
Disagree	50.00% (18)	22.22% (6)
		Chi Statistic 5.048*
		Chi Critical 3.841

* Significant difference

Table 4.18 displays students and teachers' responses to the statement "Students are taught that they can control their own behavior." The Chi statistic of 4.200 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. The percentages of agreement are very informative and eye opening.

Table 4.18

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 18:

Students Are Taught That They Can Control Their Own Behavior

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	66.67% (24)	88.89% (24)
Disagree	33.33% (12)	11.11% (3)
		Chi Statistic 4.200*
		Chi Critical 3.841

* Significant difference

The responses of the teachers and students to the statement "The school helps solve conflicts with one another" are displayed in Table 4.19. The Chi statistic of 18.667 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. There appears to be a significant

disconnect between the students and teachers as 96% of the teachers believed they were helping students solve conflicts. The results are less than desirable.

Table 4.19

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 19:

This School Helps Students Solve Conflicts with One Another

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	44.44% (16)	96.30% (26)
Disagree	55.56% (20)	3.70% (1)
		Chi Statistic 18.667*
		Chi Critical 3.841

* Significant difference

Student and teachers responses to the statement “This school encourages students to care about how others feel” are located in Table 4.20. The Chi statistic of 15.738 was greater than the Chi critical with an alpha of 0.05 and with 1 degree of freedom of 3.841; therefore, there was a statistical difference between the distributions in these two groups. The researcher accepts the alternate hypothesis and rejects the null. The majority of teachers agree the students are encouraged to care about how others feel; however, less than half of the students agree with them.

Table 4.20

Chi Squared: GHS Student Survey Likert Scale Statement 20:

This School Encourages Students to Care about How Others Feel

	<i>GHS Students</i>	<i>GHS Teachers</i>
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Agree	44.44% (16)	92.59% (25)
Disagree	55.56% (20)	7.41% (2)
		Chi Statistic 15.738*
		Chi Critical 3.841

* Significant difference

Qualitative Summary

Prior to focus group, the researcher received input from the Assistant Superintendent of the studied school district on the creation of focus group questions. The questions were then presented to a group of four reviewers consisting of a district administrator, principal, and two assistant principal; each participant had at least 20 years of administrative experience. All participants reviewed the focus group questions and provided feedback on how the questions could be improved upon. The questions were revised according the input received from the reviewers; after the revisions were completed, the questions were shared with the group one final time for approval. The four-member group approved (validated) the revised questions as the official questions to be asked during the focus questions.

After the focus group met, transcripts of the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes and patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involves the identification of concepts as themes if the concept was expressed with extensiveness, frequency, or intensity (Lewis et al., 2010). Using the previously defined qualitative data analysis process, the focus group questions focused on interpretation as they yielded these three distinct themes: Belonging and Fairness, Perceptions, and PBIS.

Focus Group Question One

What discipline infractions contribute to the likelihood of being suspended or expelled from school?

Answer to Focus Group Question One. *It Is Easy for Students to Get Kicked out of Class or Get Suspended.* While school rules vary with situations, it was apparent the students believed it was easy to get kicked out of school compared to the response from the teachers. However, the focus group outlined which offenses were grounds for suspension or expulsion.

Focus Group Question Two

Are referrals and race interrelated?

Answer to Focus Group Question Two: *My School Respects Races and Cultures, School Is Supportive and Inviting for Students to Learn, Adults at This School Treat All Students with Respect, and School Rules Are Fair.* Both teacher and student respondents agreed with the first three statements overwhelmingly. At Gates High School, the students felt they belonged and were treated fairly. The focus group responded to the question by addressing the broader view of cultural awareness and understanding. Teachers and staff have an obligation to dig deeper into their students' lives outside of school so they can support them for now and later in life.

Focus Group Question Three

What is the administrator's perspective of suspensions?

Answer to Focus Group Question Three: *Students Get in Trouble for Breaking Small Rules, Teachers Are Very Strict Here: This School Clearly Informs Students What Would Happen If They Break School Rules, and All Students Are Treated Fairly When They Break School Rules.* The students perceived themselves as getting in trouble for breaking small rules while the faculty overwhelmingly disagreed. The students and teachers agreed at a lower percentage of teachers are very strict. Both students and teachers agreed to a higher percentage for knowing their consequences when they broke rules and each agreed they were treated fairly. The focus group outlined their pressure from the district office. They equated over suspensions to teachers not following the code of conduct, the NC Teacher's Working Condition Survey, and lack of relationships between students and teachers.

Focus Group Question Four

What alternatives-to-suspension program are effective?

Answer to Focus Group Question Four: *PBIS Key Expectations and Changes in Student Behavior.* Two main themes identified included identification of PBIS key expectations, and changes in student behavior due to the implementation of PBIS. According to the focus

group, students reported that they observed peers taking additional ownership and reporting students being safer and more responsible. Leadership team members also indicated students taking more responsibility for work and behaviors. Essentially, PBIS is built on student and teacher relationships in a positive manner.

Summary of Results

At the conclusion of the data analysis, considering both the qualitative and quantitative data relevant to the research questions in this mixed-methods capstone, the research determined mixed results. The quantitative survey revealed the students agreed that they belonged and were a very important part of the school. However, the students were less favorable of the rules being implemented fairly. Student and teacher perceptions of school discipline varied on several levels. Most students agreed the rules were too strict and students were suspended from school for minor offenses. Of course, the teachers disagreed with the students. On the quantitative side, the focus group administrators attributed the enforcement and consistency of school rules as a main factor in school suspensions. In most cases, the administrators felt their hands were tied when it came to school discipline. Ultimately, the focus group agreed a positive behavior support system would benefit the students and school culture. The PBS model when implemented with fidelity can reduce discipline referrals and student suspensions from school, while improving teacher attitudes toward implementation of PBIS, teacher morale since inception of PBIS, and parent perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS in promoting positive student behavior.

Discussion

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the extent of disproportionality suspensions with alternatives to suspension. As a member of the local juvenile justice committee, the researcher looked at a list of students who were already involved

with the court system and was alarmed at the large number of Black youth. The influence of this study came about from the researcher's personal experience in the classroom and community. It is very common to drive down the street and see school age students on the corner or engaging in suspicious activities when they should be in school. The street life seems to have replaced the parents, classroom teacher and coaches. Research states that students are enthusiastic about school during their elementary years; however, as the years pass, school becomes increasingly challenging and students start dropping out at alarming rate. Failure at school can lead students to the criminal justice system and ultimately prison. It has become increasing hard to sit idle and hope things get better; therefore, improving school culture and climate with positive intervention provides the best scenario for all students and teachers to succeed.

The results of this mixed-method research study varied. Statistical analyses of the Likert style survey questions showed a strong connection between students and teachers agreeing that their school respects races and cultures. The Chi statistics describe that the students and teachers feel very strongly about culture, learning, and belonging. In an increasingly diverse society, students with a background in cultural proficiency can better navigate in adulthood and eventually the workforce. The results indicated the school is supportive and inviting for students to learn. There appears to be an emphasis on building networks in the classroom that create meaningful, supportive relationships among students and teachers. Another Chi statistic describes the students' view of discipline as fair. The degree of consequences should increase gradually, to give students adequate warning before imposing a more severe penalties. By doing so, the rules are made clear to students. In essence, the school makes it clear how students are expected to act. The sense of belonging at Gates High School is very commendable. The students and teachers embrace each other and their differences.

In contrast, the Chi statistics revealed significant differences between the perceptions of the students when compared to the perceptions of the teachers. The majority of students do not believe the adults in the building treat them with respect. Ironically, students also do not agree they treat teachers with respect. Another significant difference is the students' view of rules being fair although they previously had a favorable opinion of discipline being levied fairly. There was a disconnect with respect in this study. Students believed the teachers didn't treat them with respect and the students did not treat the teachers with respect. Other significant differences were the perception of rules. The students agreed the rules were too strict and that the rules were not made clear to them. They believed it was easy for them to get kicked out of school for breaking small rules. The students agreed the teachers did not understand what their lives were like outside of school. While there appears to be a good relationship between the students and teachers at school, a level of distrust seems to insinuate a climate issue. The results also indicate students do not agree with the school encouraging them to feel responsible for how they act or understanding how others feel. The final significant difference in this study is students agree they cannot control their own behavior and they need help solving conflicts with their peers.

The qualitative data allowed the researcher to access the thoughts and feelings of the focus group participants, which enabled the development of an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences. With at least 20 years of experience in school administration, the participants were eager to Chime in and contribute to the dialogue. The qualitative findings gave insight to the quality and usefulness to this study. By implementing PBIS, student misbehavior will likely decrease, suspensions will likely decrease, and instructional time will likely increase to meet the needs of all students.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study sought to shed light on disproportionate suspensions and the perception of school discipline from students, teachers, and administrators by introducing a positive behavior plan school-wide. Capturing the viewpoints from students and teacher gave insight to the school culture, climate, and perception. While there were agreements between the two, there was more disagreements through the lenses of the students. The use of the Chi-square instrument gave me a clear indication of the areas that needed improvement at Gates High School. The focus group gifted this study invaluable life experiences in reference to the research questions.

As districts move forward to the implementation of PBIS, the researcher cautions them to be patient. District leaders should consider this research and give schools time to develop their practices supporting the work of PBIS. It will be imperative that a strong and clear vision about the program's purpose and uses is established. Quality professional development and stakeholder involvement in the deployment will be the key to a successful implementation.

Limitations

The focus of this study included only one of the two high schools within Uwharrie County School district. As such, the findings will not necessarily transfer to other high schools due to the vast makeup of school demographics. The study focused primarily on the revolving door of school administrators and the perception from the seniors and teachers who witnessed the frequent turnover. As the respondents were not selected at random and participation was voluntary, the researcher determined that the sampling represented the given population.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the effect of out of school suspensions on students and especially Black students. In order to curtail the pipeline to prison phenomenon, schools must become the greatest, supportive safe harbor for all students. The school family should be the model for traditional families to emulate. The capstone also sought to determine exactly how PBIS could be implemented to improve the suspension rate at Gates High School. According to the results, the following recommendations are made for future researchers:

1. This study was restricted to one high school in rural Uwharrie County. An invitation for grades nine through 12 to participate in the survey may provide more reliable and valid data. Adding more participants to the analysis should help gain a wider view of school discipline and perception.
2. Since the purpose of this study was to investigate the extent of disproportionate suspensions with alternatives to suspension, a deeper analysis of the frequency, design, depth, and quality of PBIS training and implementation deployment could further develop these findings. Future researchers should include the number of years of implementation for PBIS. This will allow other researchers the opportunity to compare their data with other schools similar to their own. This could be valuable information to this study, because trends can be analyzed by the number of years the school has implemented PBIS.
3. Further analysis into specific subgroup data may provide additional findings about how this implementation may affect, for example, single parent homes versus traditional homes or Economically Disadvantaged (ED) students versus Students with Disabilities (SWD). An analysis of this type may yield information, which could have profound academic and social impacts.

4. Additional qualitative research methods may add to this body of work. Future researchers may find it useful to engage other stakeholders such as students and teachers in interviews or focus groups. Comparisons could be made regarding these groups' expertise.

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