Assistant Principals as Social Justice Leaders Closing the Racial Gap from Exclusionary Discipline Practices

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my grandmother, Ruby Skief Bonner. I proudly carry your legacy forward, taking up the baton to continue the profound work you began. Your unconditional love has deeply shaped who I am today, and your unwavering passion for social justice remains a constant source of inspiration and guidance in my life. Your compassion, resilience, and steadfast dedication to others live on through my actions and endeavors. Not a day passes without thoughts of you, and I miss you dearly. I find comfort in knowing you are always watching over me.

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Abstract of Dissertation

Assistant Principals as Social Justice Leaders Closing the Racial Gap from Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately affect students of color, reinforcing systemic inequities in K-12 schools. As key decision makers, assistant principals (APs) play a crucial yet understudied role in addressing these disparities. Despite increasing focus on social justice leadership, little research has explored how APs interpret and challenge exclusionary discipline policies.

This qualitative study examined how APs develop social justice leadership, make disciplinary decisions, and implement equity-driven strategies in urban Title I schools. Semi-structured interviews with 20 APs across 17 districts revealed how personal experiences, professional learning, and reflection shaped their leadership. Rooted in sensemaking, social justice, and transformative leadership theories, the study highlights systemic inequities, teacher bias, and cultural competence gaps contributing to discipline disparities.

Findings show APs employ restorative practices, cultural competency training, and policy advocacy to address these challenges. A revised conceptual framework connects leadership theories, offering a roadmap for reform. Implications include integrating social justice training into AP preparation, conducting equity audits, and prioritizing restorative practices over exclusionary discipline to foster inclusive schools.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Exclusionary discipline practices directed toward marginalized youth continue to be a prevailing issue within U.S. public schools (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; K. J. Banks, 2018; DeMatthews, 2016; Fissel et al., 2019; Skiba & Losen, 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018; Williams et al., 2023; Wun, 2016). This phenomenon was first brought to light with the publication of the Children's Defense Fund's 1975 report entitled, *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?* The report underscored the existence of racial disparities in education between Black and White students. Three decades later in 2014, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) reported Black students were three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than were White students. Although African American students represent 15% of the students in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC; OCR, 2012), they make up 35% of the students suspended once, 44% of those suspended more than once, and 36% of those expelled. Further, over 50% of students who are involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement are Hispanic or African American.

A joint letter from the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education (2014) concluded as follows:

> Significant and unexplained racial disparities in student discipline give rise to concerns that schools may be engaging in racial discrimination that violates the Federal civil rights laws . . . in our investigations we have found cases where African American students were disciplined more harshly and more frequently because of their race than similarly situated white students. In short, racial discrimination in school discipline is a real problem. (p. 4)

In *The School Discipline Guidance to Promote Safe, Inclusive Schools*, the Departments of Justice and Education (2014) encouraged U.S. educators to proactively redesign

discipline policies and practices to foster supportive and safe schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Based on this guidance, the Obama Administration developed the "Rethink School Discipline" package for the purpose of curbing the disparate use of suspensions and expulsions that has contributed to the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices in K-12 public schools today (Sorensen et al., 2019). The *racial discipline gap* is defined as the excessive suspension of Black and Brown students in U.S. schools. Since the 1972–1973 school year, the national rate of out-of-school suspension (OSS) for Black youth has increased by nearly 200% (from 12% to 23% in 2011–2012), whereas for White students, the rate only grew by 12% (from 6% to 7% in 2011–2012; Losen et al., 2015). To give further context, there are several pathways through which students are excluded from classrooms and schools due to school discipline (Welsh & Little, 2018). In-school suspension (ISS), OSS, expulsion, and assignment to alternative school placement are all forms of exclusionary discipline practices (Welsh & Little, 2018).

In 2018, the Trump Administration rescinded the guidance on the grounds that "the threat of investigations by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) . . . has likely had a strong negative impact on school discipline and safety" (DeVos et al., 2018., p. 67). These "dueling directives" bring light to differing beliefs in the importance of exclusionary disciplinary policies and their potential safety benefits for schools "compared to the costs to those individuals who are removed from school, costs that are borne disproportionately by members of underrepresented minority groups" (Sorensen et al., 2019, p. 2). Research has shown this legislation has influenced school-based

administrators' attitudes toward exclusionary practice policies, which correlates with school-level suspension rates (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Sorensen et al., 2019).

As those in the field of educational leadership place a renewed emphasis on preparing aspiring leaders to address social justice issues and systemic inequities in public schools, the complex and varied role of assistant principals (APs), who are the main players in adjudicating disciplinary referrals, deserves more attention (J. A. Williams et al., 2023). This is particularly important for those APs serving within urban Title I public schools, the majority of which are attended by historically marginalized populations (Noguera & Wells, 2011). Empirical research illustrates the existence of a racial discipline gap; however, there is a lack of research on the AP role, the school administrator who is mostly responsible for adjudicating student discipline (K. J. Banks, 2018; Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012; Williams et al., 2023). According to Boske and Benavente-McEnery (2012), because APs have a distinct and powerful role in the transition from zero tolerance policies to a more equitable public school environment, a deeper examination of the role of APs as social justice leaders (SJLs) has the potential to effect change and close the racial discipline gap. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to understand how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students and reduce the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline.

Statement of the Problem

Racial, gender, and income disparities are strong predictors of exclusionary disciplinary outcomes (Girvan et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019; Skiba & Losen, 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). Students with

disabilities (SWD), non-heterosexual youth, students with economic disadvantages, low-performing students, and Black and Brown students experience exclusionary discipline at higher rates than their peers (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018). These findings are consistent with previous research that identified marginalization as a key factor in student discipline outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Planty et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2011).

According to the OCR, disproportionate numbers of marginalized youth are affected by suspensions and removed from class each year for minor infractions (Nowicki, 2018). A study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office showed "Black students represent 15.5% of the public school population, [but] account for 39% of students suspended from school which is an overrepresentation of 23 percentage points" (Nowicki, 2018, pp. 12–13). The OCR (2018) reported Black students have the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions when compared to other racial or ethnic groups. Black students are 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more suspensions compared to White students in K-12 settings (OCR, 2018).

The disproportionate assignment of exclusionary discipline to Black and Brown students has resulted in students experiencing negative outcomes related to being suspended or expelled from school (Davison et al., 2022). Bottiani et al. (2017) found school-level discipline gaps to be associated with Black students' experience of school inequity, exclusion from school communities, and increased adjustment problems. Gregory et al. (2010) argued that the goal of equity for students of color in public education cannot be realized without dismantling the racial disparities present in school discipline practices.

As principals control the operations of a school building (i.e., maintaining finances, the retention and recruitment of school personnel, the enactment of district-wide policies, and the development of teachers through instructional leadership), they delegate much of the responsibility for the daily operation of the building to their APs (Busch et al., 2010). One of the major tasks delegated to the AP is school discipline. This is best illustrated by a survey of 200 New York City APs conducted by Glanz (1994) that showed 94% of the APs in New York reported student discipline as the central duty in their role as a school leader (Barnett et al., 2017; Hausman et al., 2002; D. B. Reed & Himmler, 1985; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993). Boske and Benavente-McEnery (2012) believed focusing on the role of APs is advantageous because one of the most alarming developments challenging schools is the limited pool of applicants for leadership positions and the difficulty in finding leaders who espouse the ability to empower espouse the ability to empower populations that are marginalized because of race, class, disability (mental and physical), religion, sexual identity, gender, language, and immigration status. As noted in several above-mentioned studies, APs are the school leaders who are best poised to do the work of closing the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices. There is an overabundance of research available on the general topic of exclusionary discipline, yet there is a lack of empirical literature solely centered on APs and the actions they take to close the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline practices.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

School leadership responsibilities have become more perplexing and multifaceted as a result of decades of required reform, brisk fluctuating demographics, technological

progression, declining financial support for schools, and changed expectations because of policy accountability measures (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2012; Glanz, 1994; Gurley et al., 2013; Searby et al., 2016) As a result of this paradigm, there is an imperative to find APs who understand how to promote the needs of underserved children and families in schools, which is essential to addressing marginalized populations. As entry-level administrators, APs, especially those in Title I urban K-12 public schools, are finding themselves serving as transformative activists who lead in socially just ways for the purpose of continually critiquing the conditions that perpetuate inequities on marginalized groups (Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005), and thus sustaining such socially just work in schools (Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012).

The recently updated Professional Standards in Educational Leadership (PSEL) are described as "guideposts . . . Grounded in current research and the real-life experiences of educational leaders" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015, p. 1). Standard 3 highlights that effective educational leaders "confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). According to DeMatthews (2020), the new PSEL reflect a growing awareness that school leaders need to address social and educational inequities. For the purposes of the current study, only APs in K-12 Title I urban public school districts who self-identified as SJLs were asked to participate. This criterion was a limitation of this study.

The intent within this study was to understand how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students and close the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline practices. I designed my qualitative study to address three research questions with subquestions:

- **RQ1:** How do APs develop a social justice identity?
- **RQ2:** How do APs who self-identified as social justice leaders make sense of and work toward closing the racial discipline gap, if at all?
    a. What actions and/or strategies, if any, do APs use to close the racial discipline gap and systemic barriers within school discipline?
- **RQ3:** How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools?
    a. What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process?

Significance of the Study

Overall, research related to the AP role pales in comparison to research that has been completed on the principal. Most studies with APs as the subjects have been mostly quantitative and have focused mainly on their tasks and preparedness to be promoted to the role of principal (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2017; Hausman et al., 2002; Hayes & Burkett, 2020). In contrast to the large number of studies relating to the principal role and contribution to school performance, research on the AP role and its significance is insufficient (Barnett et al., 2012; Bukoski et al., 2015). There is limited research providing a "conceptual framework of understanding [the] assistant principalship" (Woo, 2020, p. 188), and there is almost no formalized job description

covering their roles and responsibilities (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). The research on the role of the AP and exclusionary practices is very sparse. To contribute to filling this gap in the literature, the focus in the current research study was on APs as they make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students and close the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices.

Theoretical Frameworks

Sensemaking theory is used to explain how organizational policies and the development and existence of collective meanings might influence leaders' decisions. Karl Weick, the "father of sensemaking," suggested the term means simply "the making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking is the cognitive, emotional, and physical process employed by humans to construct meaning. Weick introduced the concept of sensemaking into organizational studies and asserted, "How individuals construct what they construct, why, and with what effects are central questions for people interested in sensemaking" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking offers a practical way to uncover the socio-psychological processes that play a part in organizational outcomes, instead of focusing on the results themselves (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is the activity that turns the ongoing complexity of the world into a "situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409).

Sensemaking theory has been used to examine principals' values, beliefs, and prior knowledge and how these variables influence their actions and leadership practice (DeMatthews, 2015). For example, A. E. Evans (2007) found principals made sense of change or emerging interests through a variety of sources. With this study, I examined how APs progress through a cognitive continuum to arrive at a disciplinary decision for a

student who has been referred (K. J. Banks, 2018; A. E. Evans, 2007; Olowoyeye, 2018; Weick, 1995; Williams et al., 2023). The cognitive continuum comprises several intellectual actions synthesized by the AP concluding with a judgement about a student's conduct (K. J. Banks, 2018; A. E. Evans, 2007; Olowoyeye, 2018; Weick, 1995; Williams et al., 2023). The sensemaking theory is the theoretical lens I used in this study to shed light on the mental processes of APs as they deliberate on the consequences a student might receive after being referred (K. J. Banks, 2018; A. E. Evans, 2007; Olowoyeye, 2018; Weick, 1995; Williams et al., 2023). With the discipline gap skewed negatively toward marginalized students, examining the thought processes of the school personnel most responsible for disciplinary decisions is critical (K. J. Banks, 2018; Williams et al., 2023).

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking has seven distinctive principles that set it apart from other explanatory processes. Weick proposed the following seven unique principles that differentiate sensemaking from other explanatory processes: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Along with the sensemaking process, both social justice leadership and transformative leadership theories support this study's framework. The literature recognizes social justice leadership as a specific subset of school leadership that can be defined as "principals who advocate, lead and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing conditions in the United States" (Theoharis, 2008, p. 93). Additionally, despite the difficulty many administrators might face in eschewing the order and conservative

environment in which they have been socialized (Ryan et al., 2007), Grogan (2004) claimed SJLs are able to "interrupt the continued maintenance of the status quo" (p. 95). The importance of this model in K-12 schools, and particularly the turnaround policy context, has been widely recognized as a powerful intervening variable in school success (Furman, 2012). In practice, therefore, social justice leadership involves the identification and eradication of unjust social practices and the conditions and process of replacing these practices with more equitable alternatives. Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) defined SJLs as transformative activists for school and social change who continually critique the conditions that perpetuate inequities for marginalized groups.

Transformative leadership is defined as "an ethically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interest of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owed by organizations and stakeholders" (Caldwell et al., 2012, p. 176). This theory aligns with the social justice framework and addresses the practices of leaders who are focused on ensuring equitable practices for students (Shields, 2018). This paradigm reflects a framework of belief systems that directly engages members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice (Mertens, 2010). Chapter 2 provides greater detail on all three theories and their tenets in the relation to APs and exclusionary discipline practices.

Summary of the Methodology

I used a qualitative basic interpretive design as this method focuses on inquiry and the use of a deliberate study to seek to understand a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers who adopt this paradigm are interested in understanding the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved.

Merriam described basic interpretive research as the most "common form" of qualitative research in education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23), and stated the primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret meaning. This approach provided me as the researcher an opportunity to gain an understanding of how APs construct meaning through the sensemaking process when making disciplinary decisions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I was interested in learning how APs in Title I urban K-12 public schools interpret their experiences, construct meaning, and make sense of their lives and their worlds in the context of their schools and discipline. As the main data collection tool, I conducted one 60- to 75-minute qualitative semi-structured interview with each participant. All data were then transcribed, and the transcripts were analyzed. I used thematic analysis and a proven coding scheme; the process consisted of a three-stage analysis, which assisted me with making clear connections to the theoretical framework and research questions (Maxwell, 2013).

Limitations and Delimitations

The sample used in this study was limited to 20 APs in urban Title I K-12 public schools who self-identified as SJLs. This small sample size challenged the generalizability of the findings. The delimitations for this study were established based upon the research goals, which were two pronged: (a) to better understand how APs cognitively process discipline and (b) to use the findings of this study to assist with reducing the number of marginalized students who are disproportionately excluded from the learning environment. I chose to focus exclusively on APs from urban Title I public school districts across the nation; therefore, the results may not be representative of

suburban and rural districts across the nation. The participants of the study needed to have attended a social justice leadership, cultural competency, or equity training or course and be a full-time AP with a minimum of 1 year of administrative experience at the site location. The participants' primary work duties needed to consist of making decisions on discipline involving students, including those of marginalized backgrounds.

Subjectivity Statement

To whom I was born, who was born to me, my self-identity, intersectionality, family status, the environment in which I choose to work, and where I live and have lived all provided the lens through which I approach the topic of the racial discipline gap in today's public schools. In my work as an AP for 6 years and as a principal for 2 years in an urban elementary school with a 65% free and reduced lunch population, one of my core values is to work to ensure all students have equal access to the resources they need to learn and thrive.

This value system developed based on my experiences as a woman of color growing up in West Philadelphia. I am the granddaughter of a social worker, whom I watched daily strive to provide safety and shelter to those in need across the City of Philadelphia. I am the daughter of parents who marched in the civil rights movement, and my uncle opened the first charter school in West Philadelphia. The charter school was designed to impart cultural knowledge of Africans in the diaspora to the children of West Philadelphia. I saw firsthand the reality of the school-to-prison pipeline through observations of several of my own family members' and peers' experiences in the K-12 public school educational system. This dissertation speaks directly to the systemic racism embedded within our educational system.

As defined by Theoharis (2007), a SJL is an advocate who keeps at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. My realization that this description applied to me and my work as an SJL developed over the past 10 years. I attribute this enlightenment to the environments in which I have worked, particularly urban Title I schools at both the elementary and secondary levels. As I began my journey into school administration, I came to realize my influence was, and continues to be, significant. The quote, "To whom much is given, much is required," resonates deeply with me. Being a mother of two and understanding that our country has been hit with two pandemics (i.e., COVID-19 and racism), I see the students I serve as extensions of myself and believe it is my duty to advocate for the equitable treatment of all.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the interviewer–respondent interaction is a complex process. All participants bring their own biases, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that affect interactions and data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peshkin (1994) inventoried his "subjective I's," described how these surfaced in his research, and gave each "I" a distinctive label to indicate its presence in his studies. I understood the necessity of recognizing and managing my own biases and the importance of minimizing my personal influence as the interviewer. I remained conscious of the need to distance myself, allowing participants space to explore their experiences without imposing my own perceptions and assumptions (Seidman, 2019). My subjectivity was less challenged in this study because I was deeply engaged in listening to and honoring the individual stories of the APs, which differed significantly from my own experiences.

Hearing these diverse perspectives helped create a clear separation between my biases and the narratives shared by participants.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study and are defined for the purposes of the research:

1. *Assistant principal*: The person who serves directly under the principal. The terms assistant principal, vice principal, and deputy principal are used interchangeably (Barnett et al., 2012, p. 93).
2. *Deficit thinking*: As defined by Valencia (1997), "refers to the notion that students (particularly low income, minority students) fail in school because such students and their families experience deficiencies that obstruct the learning process" (p. 9).
3. *Exclusionary discipline*: Disciplinary practices that remove students from the traditional educational setting. These include ISS, OSS, and expulsion from school (McLoughlin & Noltemeyer, 2010).
4. *Marginalized students*: "Marginalization is both a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society" (Alakhunova et al., 2015, p. 1).
5. *Racial discipline gap*: "Among students who experience exclusionary discipline, students of color, particularly African American youths, are significantly overrepresented" (McElderry & Cheng, 2014, p. 241). This inequity is referred to as the discipline gap.

6. *School-to-prison pipeline*: Punitive and overzealous disciplinary practices remove students from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2005, p. 1).
7. *Social justice leader*: As defined by Theoharis (2007), these leaders advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools.
8. *Title I*: Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA), provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure all children meet challenging state academic standards. Federal funds are currently allocated through four statutory formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (Skinner, 2019).

Chapter Summary

As an introduction, I presented the historical context of exclusionary discipline practices and policies and the roots of the racial discipline gap. I then discussed and highlighted the importance of school leaders, namely APs, and their leadership potential to close the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices.

Next, I broadly introduced the cognitive processes employed by APs when making disciplinary decisions. I also outlined the purpose of the study, presented the

research questions and significance of the study, and detailed the theoretical framework. Finally, I provided a summary of the research methodology, limitations, delimitations, and definitions of key terms.

The following chapters of this dissertation begin with Chapter 2: Review of the Literature. In this chapter, I present a complete review of the literature and delve into both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. In Chapter 3: Methodology, I detail the purpose of the study, restate the research questions, and explain the research design. In Chapter 4: Findings, I present the data and give a description of the sample for this study. Further, I explain and present the research methodology as it relates to the data analysis. In Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations, I give a discussion of the findings along with implications and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Since 1975, the overrepresentation of marginalized students in school punishment has been well-documented (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Farr et al., 2020; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Welsh & Swain, 2020). According to the OCR (2014), a disproportionate number of marginalized youth are affected by suspensions and removed from class each year for minor infractions. A U.S. Government Accountability Office (Nowicki, 2018) study showed "Black students represent 15.5% of the public school population, [but] account for 39% of students suspended from school - an overrepresentation by 23 percentage points" (pp. 12–13). The OCR (2018) reported Black students have the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions when compared to other racial or ethnic groups. Black students are 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more suspensions compared to White students in K-12 settings (OCR, 2018). The disparate use of exclusionary discipline among students who are racial and ethnic minorities, are in special education, or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ; Losen et al., 2015; Skiba & Losen, 2015) is an equity and social justice issue that has presented a challenge within the U.S. educational system for well over 70 years (C. Reed, 2024). The focus within this literature review is on the role of the AP, as they, especially in urban schools, are the leaders most concerned with responding to student–teacher conflict and student–student conflict that results in a disciplinary sanction (Barnett et al., 2012; Glanz, 1994; Kennedy et al., 2017; Kwan, 2011; Williams et al., 2023). I present this review in an attempt to understand how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to

promote the needs of all students and close the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices.

As those in the field of educational leadership place a renewed emphasis on preparing aspiring leaders to address social justice issues and systemic inequities in public schools, the complex and varied role of APs, who are the main actors in adjudicating disciplinary referrals, deserves more attention (Williams et al., 2023). This is particularly important for those APs serving within urban Title I public schools, the majority of which are attended by historically marginalized populations (Noguera & Wells, 2011). Empirical research illustrates the existence of a racial discipline gap; however, there is a lack of research on the AP, the school administrator who is most responsible for adjudicating student discipline (K. J. Banks, 2018; Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012; Williams et al., 2023). APs have a distinct and powerful role in the transition from zero tolerance policies to a more equitable public school environment, and Boske and Benavente-McEnery's (2012) assertion highlights the pivotal role APs can play in promoting social justice within schools, particularly by addressing and reducing racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. By empowering APs to lead with a focus on equity and justice, they have the potential to implement policies and practices that foster inclusivity and fairness, ensuring discipline measures are applied equitably across all student groups. This approach can contribute significantly to closing the racial gap in exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, which disproportionately affects students of color. This literature review covers relevant literature from 1970 to 2020 and includes peer-reviewed empirical research uncovered through the Education Research Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) database, ProQuest,

Journal Storage (JSTOR), reference lists from articles, Google Scholar, and recent books from the field of education and leadership. The study required the use of several keywords and phrases in isolation and in conjunction with one another, including exclusionary discipline, racial discipline gap, special education, LGBTQ, LatinX, school-to-prison pipeline, zero tolerance, assistant principal, vice principal, discipline referrals, social justice leadership, educational preparation programs, disciplinary alternative education programs, overrepresentation of minorities, restorative discipline, and positive behavior supports. I obtained additional literature and exclusionary discipline data from the U.S. Department of Education OCR. I also examined the references of the literature collected for my research and located those sources that were pertinent. The literature review begins with the theoretical frameworks, starting with Weick's sensemaking theory, followed by the social justice leadership and transformative leadership theories, and then moves to the conceptual framework. Then the discussion proceeds with the five major bodies of literature relevant to this study: the assistant principal, zero tolerance policies, pathways to school exclusion through school discipline, student discipline outcomes, and closing the racial discipline gap within exclusionary practices. The chapter concludes with inferences from the literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study had three interconnected theoretical frameworks. Sensemaking theory, SJL, and transformative leadership were employed to examine how APs make disciplinary decisions within the context of exclusionary practices. Sensemaking theory, as conceptualized by Karl Weick (1995), provided a lens for understanding how organizational policies and collective meanings influence decision-making processes,

emphasizing the cognitive and emotional processes leaders use to construct meaning in complex environments. By considering how APs navigate these processes to interpret and act on disciplinary issues, this study uncovered the socio-psychological mechanisms behind their actions. Complementing sensemaking, SJL theory positions APs as key figures in addressing systemic inequities, advocating for marginalized groups, and dismantling exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately affect students of color. Transformative leadership further enhanced this framework by focusing on ethical leadership that promotes equitable outcomes and challenges the status quo, ensuring decision making prioritizes fairness and justice. Together, these theories offered a robust framework for analyzing APs' roles in shaping discipline practices that align with broader goals of equity and social change in education.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking theory is used to explain how organizational policies and the development and existence of collective meanings might influence leaders' decisions. Karl Weick, the "father of sensemaking," suggested the term means simply "the making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking is the cognitive, emotional, and physical process employed by humans to construct meaning. Weick introduced the concept of sensemaking into organizational studies and asserted, "How they construct what they construct, why, and with what effects are central questions for people interested in sensemaking" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking offers a practical way to uncover the socio-psychological processes that play a part in organizational outcomes, instead of focusing on the results themselves (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is the activity that turns

the ongoing complexity of the world into a "situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409).

According to Schwandt (2005), people unknowingly perform the act of sensemaking, and it is a complex process involving multiple variables requiring the individual to place stimuli into frames of reference that shape meaning, promote understanding, and guide action. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019) contended that "this dynamic process of constructing meaning out of present stimuli is mediated by prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs and values, which are all embedded in the social context within which people work" (p. 282). Sensemaking is a recursive cycle that begins with both unconscious and conscious anticipations and assumptions, which serve as predictions about future events (Louis, 1980). This cyclical process integrates ongoing retrospective analysis to develop knowledge structures that serve as foundations for interpretations of unexpected occurrences; however, "it is not simply the interpretation of information; rather, the continuous interaction with information [that] allows meaning to emerge" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 182). A. E. Evans (2007) described sensemaking as meaning making and the "cognitive act of taking in information, framing it and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meanings for individuals" (p. 161).

Ancona (2012) asserted that "sensemaking calls for courage, because while there is a deep human need to understand and know what is going on in a changing world, illuminating the change is often a lonely and unpopular task" (p. 4). Sensemaking in education is generally understood to be the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages

meaning for individuals (A. E. Evans, 2007). DeMatthews (2015) stressed that sensemaking is "a useful tool for examining school leadership because schools are complex organizations that receive conflicting messages and are subjected to misaligned polices" (p. 140).

Sensemaking theory has been used to examine principals' values, beliefs, and prior knowledge and how these variables influence their actions and leadership practice (DeMatthews, 2015). For example, A. E. Evans (2007) found that principals made sense of change or emerging interests through a variety of sources, but certain principals did not have the past experiences or knowledge to modify their thinking. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking has seven distinctive principles that set it apart from other explanatory processes. These seven principles are defined as identity, retrospect, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. These seven sensemaking tenets are explained in the context of the AP's role as it relates to student discipline.

Grounded in Identity Construction. Identity construction is a foundational principle of the sensemaking concept as "sensemaking begins with the sensemaker" (Weick, 1995, p. 18). Who we are and what factors have shaped our lives influence how we see the world. Our identity is continually being redefined as a result of experiences both past and present. Interactions with others (e.g., family, friends, religion, childhood experiences, our places of employment, and professional interactions) affect how we view certain situations (Mills et al., 2010). The AP's identity is continuously being developed by the skills acquired throughout their careers, past experiences, and their interactions with colleagues and stakeholders (Olowoyeye, 2018). The position or duty assigned to an individual is a factor in how APs self-identify (Olowoyeye, 2018; Weick,

1995). Skills acquired throughout their career and their interactions with educators, students, and parents influence how they continuously construct their identity. Therefore, identity construction pertains to the process of sensemaking by the sensemaker (Mills et al., 2010).

Retrospective. Weick (1995) proposed that retrospection describes "the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it" (p. 24). Our present-day occurrences are often dictated by experiences from our past, which, in turn, assist with the sensemaking process. "The sensemaking process is, therefore, comparative since it involves the comparison of a present occurrence to a similar or similar previous event to make sense of the situation at hand" (Mills et al., 2010, p. 184).

Values or priorities underscore the projects, services, policies, and practices that might be significant to an individual; hence, the experiences the person chooses to refer to, pull from, or place emphasis on provide additional insight into their belief system or agenda (Weick, 1995). APs are always drawing from past occurrences to make discretionary decisions regarding student discipline to maintain order (Olowoyeye, 2018).

Enactive of the Environment. The sensemaking principle of enactment emphasizes that people, through action, create their own environment and their "created environments" become either "constraints or opportunities to face" (Weick, 1995, p. 31). As noted by Mills et al. (2010), enactive of the environment implies that "sensemaking is about making sense of experience within our environment" (p. 185). Therefore, our sensemaking can be either developed or stifled by the very atmosphere in which we work (Mills et al., 2010). Olowoyeye (2018) suggested the school

environment, particularly the culture and climate, which are shaped by administration, can sometimes prevent leaders from perceiving situations objectively. Their sensemaking of marginalized students perceived "inappropriate behaviors influenced by the culture and climate of the school might impair their ability to think through an incident to make the right decision reasonably" (Olowoyeye, 2018, p. 45). Having a sense of the school's culture and its norms and what APs accomplish, forget, or attend to later than expected can give insight into the beliefs and value systems upheld within the school (Olowoyeye, 2018; Weick, 1995).

Social. Sensemaking is a social process underscored by the interdependence of humans, their social interactions, and a variety of social factors. According to Weick (1995), "Those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretations and interpreting. Conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present" (p. 39). Additionally, sensemaking researchers "pay a lot of attention to talk, discourse, and conversation because that is how a great deal of social contact is meditated" (Weick, 1995, p. 41). Mills et al. (2010) contended that "an organization's rules, routines, symbols, and language impact an individual's sensemaking through the practices or scripts for socially acceptable 'appropriate' behavior provided to the individual by the organization" (Mills et al., 2010, p. 185). APs make sense of student behaviors related to race as they interact with other administrators, teachers, students, and parents in conjunction with their perception of the shared understanding of the discipline policy, rules, routines, symbols, and the language of the school (Mills et al., 2010; Olowoyeye, 2018).

Ongoing. Sensemaking has no origin nor does it have a conclusion, as people are always engaged in situations. Weick (1995) asserted that "sensemaking never starts" (p. 43), and the reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops. "People are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those same people focus on the past from some point beyond it" (p. 43). Sensemaking occurs in a non-stop subsequent process due to the constant flow of information we receive as we interact with the world and other individuals around us (Mills et al., 2010). Mills et al. (2010) captured this principle best by asserting that the ongoing principle is a continuous act:

> That we are constantly making sense of what is happening around us but that we isolate moments and cues from this continuous sensemaking to make sense of the current situation, which we will be forced to attend to because of a break in the routine. (p. 186)

On a given day within a school environment, anything can happen, from an unexpected meeting or an irritated parent, to a medical emergency where an ambulance has to be called or where a student goes into crisis; such instances might disrupt the normal day-to-day activity of an administrator. APs must be cognizant of how daily interruptions could potentially affect their sensemaking process negatively and subject them to isolate pertinent cues that could result in faulty decision making (Olowoyeye, 2018).

Focused on and by Extracted Cues. The speed at which sensemaking occurs places humans at a disadvantage. As Weick (1995) explained, "Sensemaking tends to be swift, which means we are more likely to see products than process. To counteract this, we need to . . . pay close attention to the ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract" (p. 49). In defining cues, Weick noted, "Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (p. 50). Extracted cues assist people with generating points of

reference, which then guide direction and decision making. The process of sensemaking might allow a person to interpret cues in ways that support their beliefs (Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). It is, therefore, possible for individuals to ignore the obvious if they believe it contradicts their notion of "what was right or wrong" and thus extract cues that support what they have learned or experienced (Mills et al., 2010). APs rely on the cues they extract from policy, rules, regulations, and established norms of the school to make sense of students' behavior and decide on the consequence that aligns with their belief (Olowoyeye, 2018).

Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy. Based on the definition given by Mills et al. (2010), "Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy means that we do not rely on the accuracy of our perceptions when we make sense of an event. Instead, we look for cues that make our sensemaking seem plausible" (p. 185). The process of sensemaking does not depend on accuracy; alternatively, it relates to "plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention and instrumentality" (Weick, 1995, p. 56). From the perspective of an individual, the statement is logical, there is an established pattern, and it makes sense (Weick, 1995). Looking for signals that make our sensemaking seem plausible distorts the accuracy of any information and results in our reliance on incorrect decision making to determine what is right or wrong (Mills et al., 2010). APs regularly encounter each of these factors, and they use established decisions on previous incidents that are regarded as socially acceptable and credible to inform their attempts to make sense of the discipline practices that relate to the student behavior. The narrative in the office discipline referral may not be accurate; however, it probably offers

an account that could withstand criticism and "keep things moving" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415).

Summary. The seven interrelated sensemaking properties—construction of identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility—provide an understanding of how APs try to make sense of exclusionary discipline practices. Understanding APs' sensemaking processes regarding educational issues such as programs, policies, and practices is important because they influence APs' explanation of disciplinary problems and the actions they take in response to these issues (A. E. Evans, 2007; Olowoyeye, 2018). As such, sensemaking was useful for this study for several reasons. First, for the purpose of this study, the sensemaking of APs was of particular importance to understand how they make sense of exclusionary discipline policies related to the issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. Second, the meaning APs make about a discipline event related to race, gender, and ethnicity could potentially influence their explanation of a problem and the actions they will take in response to the issue. Last, APs' roles and responsibilities within the educational setting as well as their racial identity influence their sensemaking.

Social Justice Leadership

Carpenter et al. (2017) postulated that in response to changing school climates and the social systems in which they operate, an increased demand exists in the field of educational leadership to investigate whether leaders are prepared to address social justice issues. Despite its distinction in recent literature, social justice is not easily defined conceptually (Carpenter et al., 2017). Social justice leadership has many definitions, as noted by Guillaume et al. (2019), and there is no agreement among

researchers on a direct definition (Furman, 2012; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Marshall, 2004). Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) defined SJLs as transformative activists for school and social change who continually critique the conditions that perpetuate inequities for marginalized groups. Brown (2006) emphasized social justice as a framework for developing critical consciousness to eliminate past practices nested in racism, sexism, homophobia, class discrimination, and religious intolerance. According to Woods and Hauser (2013), Brown's (2006) framework challenges the exclusion, power, inequity, and injustice inherent in public education.

Theoharis (2008) commented that social justice leadership situates marginalized students at the center of all leadership decisions. Shields (2010) emphasized the importance of facilitating a moral dialogue that encourages high achievement for all students and building relationships with students of all abilities and cultures. Guillaume et al. (2019) added that social justice leadership is defined by school leaders who are "reflective of their values, beliefs, and bias to recognize their role within an oppressive system to advocate for disadvantaged students" (p. 283). For the purpose of this literature review, social justice is defined as the method by which "educational leaders make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). The term social justice leadership has been recognized within the literature as a specific subset of school leadership defined as "principals who advocate, lead and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing conditions in the United States" (Theoharis, 2010, p. 93).

I used Theoharis's (2007) definition of social justice leadership to reflect that these principals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. Addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools is a critical component of this definition. Thus, inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and other students who have been traditionally separated in schools are also necessitated by this definition. Sapon-Shevin (2003) stated, "Inclusion is not about disability. . . . Inclusion is about social justice. . . . By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us" (pp. 26, 28). The definition I used for this study builds on Sapon-Shevin's groundwork linking inclusive schooling and social justice.

Additionally, despite the difficulty many administrators might face in eschewing the order and conservative environment in which they have been socialized (Ryan et al., 2007), Grogan (2004) claimed SJLs must "interrupt the continued maintenance of the status quo" (p. 95). The importance of this model in K-12 schools, and particularly the turnaround policy context, has been recognized widely as a powerful intervening variable in school success (Furman, 2012). In practice, therefore, social justice leadership involves the identification and eradication of unjust social practices and conditions as well as the process of replacing these practices with more equitable alternatives.

Social justice leadership is about understanding the inequities that persist in schools and taking action (Dantley & Tillman, 2006). The practice of social justice leadership begins with an ability to recognize inequity among the other issues associated with school administration. APs who are seeking to establish more socially just schools

must address the disproportionality of exclusionary discipline practices within their schools (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). According to DeMatthews (2015), theories of social justice tend to be centered on three facets of justice: distributive, cultural, and associational. The application of sensemaking to school leadership enables a dual exploration into an AP's experiences and how their actions intricately connected to social justice and school context.

Distributive Facet of Social Justice. The distributive aspect of social justice addresses the efforts of economically defined groups to end exploitation and achieve redistribution (DeMatthews et al., 2015). Distributive justice emphasizes how organizations or institutions allocate fundamental rights, responsibilities, and benefits derived from social cooperation (Rawls, 2017, p. 27). This facet ensures schools and programs serving marginalized students are not restricted to inadequate, underfunded, understaffed, or poorly equipped environments that offer separate and insufficient educational programs (DeMatthews et al., 2015).

Cultural Facet of Social Justice. The cultural facet of social justice is related to "cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect. Cultural justice is about the recognition and establishment of mainstream conceptualizations of marginalized groups as communities of value" (DeMatthews et al., 2015, p. 18). This facet of justice aims at addressing deficit thinking, stereotyping, disrespect, and blaming the student or community for perceived educational shortcomings (Paris, 2012).

Associational Justice Facet of Social Justice. Associational justice is attentive to self-determination and eliminating the "patterns of association amongst individuals and amongst groups which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which

affect the conditions within which they live and act" (DeMatthews et al., 2015, p. 18). It is about ensuring all previously subordinated groups are able to fully participate in the decisions that affect their lives (DeMatthews, 2015). According to DeMatthews et al. (2015),

> A prominent goal of associational justice is to cultivate critically-minded and politicized students (adult, youth, marginalized communities), who assess power dynamics, recognize opportunities to influence, become involved in political matters, and generate new identities and possibilities through participation, learning, and political struggle. (p. 19)

Distributive, cultural, and associational justice seem to be straightforward yet challenging, DeMatthews (2015) asserted, but they are within reach and attainable with great effort. Yet, "Social justice simultaneously concerns each of these facets through an intersectionality of marginalized groups with different interests, values, and preferences" (DeMatthews et al., 2015, p. 20).

Transformative Leadership

The transformative "paradigm serves as an umbrella for research theories and approaches that place priority on social justice and human rights" (Mertens, 2010, p. 473). According to Graham and Nevarez (2017), transformative leaders use equity, social justice, and fairness to empower marginalized communities. Transformative leaders address the needs of diverse populations and empower individuals to challenge the status quo and affirm their identity, and serve as allies to communities facing oppression, subjugation, and discernment (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). Transformative leadership "begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others" (Shields, 2010, p. 559). This theory aligns with a social justice framework and addresses the practices of leaders who are focused on consistent equitable

practices for students (Shields, 2018), which is well suited to close the racial discipline gap (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). This paradigm is a framework of belief systems that directly engages members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice (Mertens, 2010).

Transformative leadership theory is an offshoot of transformational leadership and has eight tenets. For the purpose of this study, I used three of the eight tenets to assist with the identification of the actions of transformative leaders. Transformative leadership, according to Shields (2018), displays the following: the mandate to effect deep and equitable change; a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice; and the need to balance critique with promise and the call to exhibit moral courage.

The Mandate to Effect Deep and Equitable Change. The first tenet of transformative leadership is to understand and accept the mandate for deep equitable change. This requires leaders first to determine the change that is necessary to create schools that are equitable and excellent, inclusive, and socially just. Shields (2018) asserted that "schools reproduce inequitable situations by marginalizing and disadvantaging some children while advantaging and privileging others" (p. 29). Shields offered two keys to overcoming marginalization: rejecting deficit thinking and engaging in dialogue, democratic discourse, and courageous conversations. This tenet goes hand in hand with the cultural facet of social justice presented in the previous section.

Focus on Emancipation, Democracy, Equity, and Justice. Transformative leaders seek to overturn the institutionalized structures that continue to "imprison, oppress, and marginalized students" (Shields, 2009, p. 96). This tenet focuses on the freedom or emancipation of students by removing barriers constituted by prejudice and

discrimination. According to Shields (2018), in order for schools to deliver an inclusive and equitable education for all students, they must foster a learning environment that ensures safety.

The Need to Balance Critique With Promise and the Call to Exhibit Moral Courage. Moral courage empowers leaders not only to critique inequity but also move forward, ensuring the promise of a better future for all. The last two tenets are for APs who are willing to make changes that result in justice for all students to take a courageous stand and to do the right thing regardless of public opinion and personal beliefs. These leaders exhibit moral courage, are explicit, and do not quietly address racism, homophobia, or other inequities. Transformative leaders take a strong stand, know themselves, and know their "true North and their non-negotiables" (Shields, 2018, p. 110). According to Shields (2018), these leaders believe change can occur and thus they lead with persistence, optimism, and courage. These leaders make extraordinary gains with their inclusive and transformative approaches (Shields, 2018).

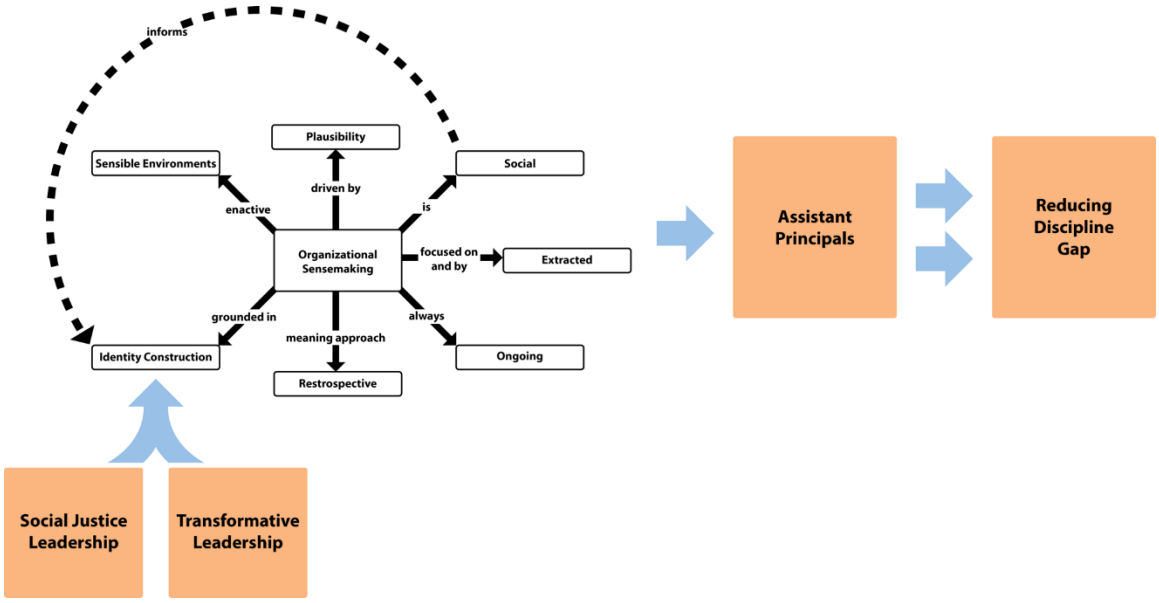
Conceptual Framework

I constructed this study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1) based on the sensemaking process, social justice leadership, and transformative leadership theories. These theories worked together "like a recipe or a blueprint" for the study (Magher, 2016, para. 1). The aim was to understand the actions APs use to close the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices. In Figure 1, organizational sensemaking is central, with arrows pointing to each principle, which are arranged in a circle around the center. The principle of being grounded in identity is informed by the social principle; retrospective, positioned to the right of identity construction, involves making meaning by drawing on

past experiences to help with current events. To the left of identity construction is sensible environments; enactment highlights that individuals create their environment through action, and these "created environments" become either "constraints or opportunities" (Weick, 1995, p. 31). Plausibility, located near sensible environments, refers to the sensemaking process that focuses on coherence, reasonableness, and practicality rather than strict accuracy (Weick, 1995, p. 56). The ongoing principle reflects the continuous nature of sensemaking, driven by the constant stream of information we receive as we interact with the world and others (Mills et al., 2010). The final principle, extracted cues, refers to the specific signals that sensemaking targets, and because the process often happens quickly, we are more likely to notice the outcomes rather than the steps leading to them. At the bottom left of the sensemaking diagram, boxes representing social justice leadership and transformative leadership point to identity construction, which is where APs develop their social justice leadership identity. These elements help APs reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices. The central figure represents the sensemaking process, with an arrow leading to the AP, and from there, arrows point to reducing the racial discipline gap. As APs work to reduce this gap, they become transformative leaders.

Figure 1

Sensemaking, Social Justice, and Transformative Leadership



Note. Figure 1 demonstrates the combination of the properties of organizational sensemaking, the tenets of social justice leadership, and transformative leadership. These three theories illustrate how APs are closing the racial discipline gap in urban Title I public schools. The sensemaking portion, in the middle, is a modification from CmapTools (Florida Institute for Human & Machine Cognition, n.d.). The concept of transformative leadership is drawn from Shields (2018).

According to DeMatthews (2015), "The practice of social justice leadership begins with an ability to recognize inequity amongst other issues associated with school administration" (p. 145). For the AP, this means being cognizant of the racial discipline gap and its disparate impact on marginalized students. Sensemaking, social justice leadership, and transformative leadership provided a useful framework with which to explore how race, class, and disability intersect with a school's complex organizational

features and the AP's experiences and personal orientations toward social justice (DeMatthews, 2015).

Within the last 15 years, sensemaking as a theory has been used to study K-12 public education (DeMatthews, 2012). Education policy researchers have begun to use sensemaking theory to expand the understanding of policy implementation beyond motivation and capacity (Spillane et al., 2002). Researchers have focused more on how principals make sense of, frame, derive, and interpret the multiple messages, contexts, and threats they receive from their school environments (DeMatthews, 2012; A. E. Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002). There have been numerous articles written and documented on the sensemaking theory of principal leadership. However, through a search of ProQuest (PQDT), I only located one dissertation, written in 2018, on the sensemaking theory of the AP in reference to school discipline. K. J. Banks (2018) conducted an exploratory study on APs' sensemaking when addressing office discipline referrals involving Black male students. This qualitative research used a multi-case study design to explore the experiences of three secondary APs working in an urban school district in the southeastern United States. The key findings from K. J. Banks's study indicated the social justice orientation of the APs drove their discipline approach, APs contend with the challenge of coaching culturally incompetent teachers, and there were multiple variables that informed the decision making of APs. K. J. Banks focused on APs at the secondary level and the Black male demographic (K. J. Banks, 2018).

Scholars have long highlighted the disproportionate representation of Black males in exclusionary discipline practices (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). Unlike the study by K. J. Banks (2018), the focus in the current study was on all marginalized students at the K-

12 level as opposed to just Black males at the secondary level. The need has grown for additional empirical studies on APs closing the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices in urban Title I public schools.

The Assistant Principal

As previously stated, most of the research on educational leadership is centered on the role of the principal, with very little empirical research geared toward the intricacies of the role of the AP (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Armstrong, 2015; Glanz, 1994; Gonzales, 2019; Gurley et al., 2013; James, 2017; Oliver, 2005; Peters et al., 2015; Searby et al., 2016; Walker & Kwan, 2012). Researchers have coined the AP as the "forgotten" person or "stepchild" (Austin & Brown, 1970; Glanz, 1994; Kwan, 2011; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017) and a "wasted educational resource" (Oleszewski et al., 2012, p. 265). Studies that provided a critical analysis of APs did not appear until the mid-1980s when researchers in the United States began carefully examining the roles and responsibilities of APs (Sun & Shoho, 2017).

This concept of APs as important yet underutilized resources is best corroborated by the completion of the first empirical study on the AP by Austin and Brown (1970, p. 23) in which they described the AP as a "stepchild." Austin and Brown (1970) surveyed 1,200 APs nationwide, and according to Glanz (1994), this study was not a critical analysis of the AP but rather a descriptive overview of the position. This was due, in part, to high stakes accountability testing and the need for principals to share the responsibility for school-wide reform (Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012). The role of the AP has evolved over the years. Today, APs are required to have a set of skills and a disposition apart from the principal (Williams et al., 2023). This position has transformed from a

supporting role that was developed to relieve many of the encumbrances of the principal to a critical role that influences school improvement (Gaymon, 2017).

School leadership responsibilities have become more perplexing and multifaceted as a result of decades of required reform, briskly fluctuating demographics, technological progression, declining financial support for schools, and changed expectations as a result of policy accountability measures (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2012; Glanz, 1994; Gurley et al., 2013; Searby et al., 2016). According to Boske and Benavente-McEnery (2012), focusing on the role of the AP is advantageous because one of the most alarming developments challenging schools is the limited pool of applicants for leadership positions and finding leaders who espouse the ability to empower populations that have been marginalized due to race, class, ability (mental and physical), religion, sexual identity, gender, language, and immigration status.

APs' Roles and Responsibilities

As principals control the operations of school buildings (i.e., maintaining finances, the retention and recruitment of school personnel, the enactment of district-wide policies, and the development of teachers through instructional leadership), they delegate much of the responsibility for the daily operations (e.g., employee disputes/complaints, student–teacher conflicts, student to student confrontations, etc.) within the building to their APs (Busch et al., 2010). APs' roles and duties are broadly defined, as they are dependent on addressing myriad challenges in schools and school districts (E. Goldring et al., 2008), and these roles can differ based on the school districts they serve. The unforeseen nature of such matters contributes to APs feeling unprepared for the challenges of the position (Williams et al., 2023). Oleszewski et al. (2012) discovered

that APs' challenges "pertain to workload and task management conflicts with adults and students, and curriculum and instruction issues" (p. 92). They also found that "novice" and seasoned APs "did not feel ready to work with people (especially when conflicts arose), did not understand certain job expectations and did not possess the organizational and managerial skills needed to accomplish tasks" (p. 109). Regardless of the number of years in the position, many APs are still trying to mature in response to the ever-changing needs of students and teachers (Williams et al., 2023). An AP's initial transition is dependent on their own personal, previous professional and educational leadership program experiences (Armstrong, 2012).

APs as Disciplinarians

Overwhelmed by their disciplinary duties and myriad responsibilities, some APs feel unprepared to take a position of leadership over faculty, staff, students, and the school community that 21st-century schools require. Armstrong (2012) called the transition from teacher to AP a "significant personal and professional turning point" (p. 398). Individuals have routinely noted their ineptness as they transitioned to the AP position (Busch et al., 2010). Armstrong (2012) added that "changing educational careers exposes novices to new responsibilities, the norms and expectations of a different reference group, and higher levels of scrutiny and accountability" (p. 399). Armstrong (2010) researched APs' feelings of unpreparedness when confronting the real-world expectations of the public school environment. Another study showed an AP's instability can directly influence school discipline decisions (Oleszewski et al., 2012). How APs select a certain discipline outcome for a student's behavior is also influenced by their interpersonal relationships with students, teachers, principals, and support staff

(Armstrong, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2017), and new administrators cannot be seen as "soft" on discipline or they risk losing the respect of teachers and students (Tredway et al., 2007, p. 214).

Tredway et al. (2007) acknowledged that to be a "disciplinarian and system challenger/changer at the same time is not an easy task" (p. 214). New administrators are fully aware that students are often sent out of class too frequently for reasons that relate directly to the teacher's inability to manage the classroom and respect students (Tredway et al., 2007). Further, Tredway et al. examined one aspect of the AP as a disciplinarian through the lens of leadership stories. The disciplinary role presents challenges for new administrators, as it is a requirement of the position. New administrators are typically student advocates in this arena, but experience difficulty interacting with teachers and other adults who are responsible for discipline. Their findings showed APs' use of the legal and punitive language that is now common in schools tends to reinforce the current systems. They often challenge the disciplinary systems on a case-by-case basis or alter parts of such systems, but do not interrupt the overall procedures for carrying out discipline. Finally, APs are conflicted about their new identity as enforcer in this role and experience frustration in navigating the territory of disciplinarian. Tredway et al. stated the AP's "inability to challenge the system may belie an inability to tackle the harder questions of equity and race, which would necessarily involve teachers in examining their perspectives and practices vis-à-vis students of color" (p. 218). This aligns with the findings of Kennedy and Murphy (2016), who examined APs in Title I middle schools and their use of corporal punishment and determined that the APs in their study focused more on acquiring approaches to managing student misbehavior based on what they

perceived as a best "fit" with teachers' and principals' ideology on school discipline. This sets a "dangerous precedent" for APs who, in acquiesce to persuasive teachers and principals, can become "strict disciplinarians" who are blind to the unfair treatment of marginalized students (Williams et al., 2023, p. 1545).

APs as Social Justice Leaders

Carpenter et al. (2017) employed an exploratory research design to understand how APs working with historically marginalized populations contend with social justice issues such as race and school discipline. They discovered that the participants' identity (e.g., belief and views about their racial positioning in society) and understanding of race in society greatly influenced their view regarding student misconduct as individualized behavior (e.g., victimization) versus teachers' and their own actions being a subset of institutionalized racism. In a more recent study, Williams et al. (2023) explored how APs approach disciplinary responsibilities with Black students while addressing issues of race in urban middle schools. Significant phrases were selected based on similarities and context, which aligned with critical race theory (CRT). Though questions relating to each CRT tenet were not explicitly asked, specific phrases and meanings from the experiences emerged that aligned with the overall concepts of racial identity, color blindness, color-evasiveness, and Black students' knowledge and background color blindness were the sailable emergent themes. Williams et al. (2023) surmised,

> APs exist in an ideological vacuum concerning race, urban schools, and school discipline, where potentially they can believe in the "goodness" of their actions (e.g., based on their own identity and interpersonal relationships with other school staff) without considering that some, if not all, of their disciplinary actions toward African American students are oppressive. (p. 1546)

Khalifa et al. (2016) challenged school administrators who serve in urban environments to critically examine whose voice is important when they are making decisions for or about marginalized students.

The role of the AP as disciplinarian is well founded in the research (Hausman et al., 2002; Walker & Kwan, 2012). A review of early literature on the role of APs defined the position to include mostly student discipline and attendance (D. B. Reed & Conners, 1982; D. B. Reed & Himmler, 1985). Indeed, the days of many APs consist of books, behinds, and buses (Good, 2014, p. 46). Though APs play an important role in instructional leadership and staff management, the need for student management often dominates their work (Oleszewski et al., 2012).

The upcoming sections explore zero tolerance policies, pathways to school exclusion through school discipline, student discipline outcomes, and reducing exclusionary practices. The majority of the sources in the upcoming sections center the intents and practices of school administrators, teachers, staff, and educators in general or principals in particular. However, take note that the role of the AP has been omitted from much of the discourse on disciplinary policies, although they are the ones to whom the discipline work is delegated by their supervisor—the principal.

Zero Tolerance Policies

The purpose of this section is to provide the history, application, and impact of zero tolerance policies. Since the early 1970s, OSS rates have risen due to the growing reliance on OSS as a disciplinary measure and the implementation of policies like zero tolerance (American Psychological Association [APA] Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

According to Wacquant (1999), zero tolerance refers to the use of strict, uncompromising, automatic punishment to eliminate undesirable behavior. Zero tolerance policies have generally involved harsh disciplinary consequences such as long-term or permanent suspension or expulsion for violations and often lead to arrest and referral to juvenile or adult court (Browne, 2005; Heitzeg, 2009; Spence, 2020; Wilson, 2014). DeMatthews et al. (2017) and Irby (2014) defined reasonable punishment as appropriate, instructive, and valuable to student development, whereas harsh punishment, overly punitive punishment, and counterproductive punishment reflect the misuse or abuse of power that further contributes to widening racial discipline gaps and fueling the school-to-prison pipeline (Irby, 2014, p. 521). Harsh punishment is a result of state and district discipline policies that are increasingly overly reactive to minor instances of student misconduct and too narrowly focused on adherence to procedural requirements, and they often lead to historic patterns of racial discrimination in schools (Irby, 2014). Zero tolerance policies assume that removing students who engage in disruptive behavior will deter others from disruption and create an improved climate for those students who remain (Skiba, 2014).

This historic pattern of racial discrimination is best evidenced by an extensive longitudinal study with Texan middle schools. Using school and juvenile justice system records from Texas, Fabelo et al. (2011) examined the effect of school disciplinary policies and procedures on student outcomes, including their involvement with the juvenile justice system. Slightly more than half of the 928,940 students in the study were male (51%), and 14% were African American, 40% were Hispanic, and 4% were White/Not Hispanic. About 13% of the students were classified as receiving special

education at any time during the tracking period, and 60% of the students studied were classified as "economically disadvantaged" for the same time period. Data for the study were obtained from several sources: analysis of individual school records and school campus data for all seventh-grade public school students in Texas for the years 2000 through 2002, analysis of each grade's (i.e., sixth–eighth) student records for at least a 6-year period, and information from the state's juvenile justice database (Fabelo et al., 2011). Two statistical descriptive and multivariate approaches primarily were used to address the eight research questions.

Key findings from the Fabelo et al. (2011) study included the following: (a) nearly six in 10 public-school students in the study were suspended or expelled at least once between their seventh- and eighth-grade school years; (b) African American students and those with educational disabilities were disproportionately more likely to be removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons; (c) students who were suspended or expelled, especially those who were repeatedly disciplined, were more likely to be held back from graduation or to drop out of school compared to students not involved in the disciplinary system; (d) students who were expelled or suspended had a significantly higher likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system compared to other students; and (e) the suspension and expulsion rates among schools varied significantly.

In another study, Kupchik and Ward (2014) found exclusionary security measures to be most common in schools attended by poor and non-White students. In their research, they used nationally-representative school-level data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety to consider the security measures employed in elementary, middle, and high schools. Their sample consisted of 700 elementary schools, 920 middle schools, and

890 high schools (total sample N = 2,510). Results indicated that though security measures are ubiquitous in U.S. high schools, those considered more exclusionary are concentrated in elementary, middle, and high schools attended by non-White or poorer students (Kupchik & Ward, 2014).

These findings serve as examples of the significant effect of these disciplinary policies on the outcomes for the students involved (Fabelo et al., 2011). This association with exclusionary practices and criminalization of youth is termed the school-to-prison pipeline, which researchers have stated is a byproduct of zero tolerance policies (Skiba, 2014; Wilson, 2014).

History of Zero Tolerance

School discipline in the United States has become increasingly more stringent, notably through the increased use of formal punishments such as OSS and expulsion (Cook et al., 2010; Heitzeg, 2009; Losen et al., 2015; Sorensen et al., 2019). This stringency can be attributed to the implementation of zero tolerance policies by the Reagan Administration in the 1980s (Spence, 2020). This policy targeted both drug- and weapon-related offenses (Spence, 2020).

School districts within California and Kentucky were the first to declare regulations to suspend and expel students caught on school grounds with drugs or weapons (Bryan, 2022; Spence, 2020). Congress later passed the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994, which President Clinton signed into law (Bryan, 2022; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2014). This required schools to enforce zero tolerance policies by expelling students for one calendar year for possession of a firearm on school grounds. The overall intent of this federal mandate was to create a safe space for students and school

administrators, and if schools failed to comply, they were stripped of the federal funding that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provides (Bryan, 2022; Gun Free Schools Act, 1994; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 1999a, 1999b; Spence, 2020).

During the GFSA time period, based on data from collected by Snyder and Dillow (2009), the discipline problems public-school principals most often cited as serious or moderate were student tardiness (40%), student absenteeism (25%), and fighting between students (21%). Weapons, drug sales on campus, and physical assaults on teachers were less prevalent problems; less than 2% of the public-school principals ranked them as serious or moderate problems in their schools (Snyder & Dillow, 2009). These findings also were supported by GFSA data. Although any incident of weapons in school is one too many, GFSA data indicated weapons in schools are relatively rare. For example, in 1999–2000, approximately 49 million students attended public schools. Of these, 2,857, or .058 out of 1,000, were caught possessing a weapon on campus. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, zero tolerance within schools became public policy. This was best evidenced by 90% of public schools reporting adopting zero tolerance policies (Verdugo, 2002). However, despite the low incidence of these serious problems, public schools continued to adopt harsh disciplinary policies in the form of zero tolerance and have added more disciplinary type policies to address less serious problems (Heitzeg, 2009).

This mandate eventually produced unintended consequences. Schools within the United States adopted zero tolerance policies for weapon, alcohol, and drug possession and threatening behavior on school property (Heitzeg, 2009). According to Heitzeg (2009), school districts had 100% prohibitions against weapons and fighting. Eighty percent of schools had bans on gang activity at school and 90% implemented zero

tolerance policies for fighting, insubordination, dress code, and disruptive behavior. Removal for rule breaking became the default position based upon the belief that this made schools more secure (Heitzeg, 2009; Spence, 2020; Wilson, 2014). School districts began to increase the security presence at school. It became commonplace for school districts to assign staff to monitor hallways and bathrooms, use metal detectors and cameras, and have uniformed security guards or school-based police present (Heitzeg, 2009; Spence, 2020; Wilson, 2014). These enhanced security measures were a byproduct of school shootings in largely White suburban schools and most readily adopted and enforced in urban area schools with low student-to-teacher ratios, high percentages of students of color, and lower test scores (Skiba et al., 2003).

Kennedy et al. (2019) posited that the justification for zero tolerance policies was fed by public perception of the Reagan-era crime wave. By subscribing to a "discourse of safety" (p. 132), educators employed exclusionary discipline practices despite their disproportionately negative impacts on students of color. The discourse of safety supported the use of zero tolerance policies that were promoted to eliminate racial biases in disciplinary consequences but have instead continued to disproportionately exclude students of color from schools (Skiba et al., 2011). These racial disproportionalities resulting from such color-blind policies should have motivated educators to reevaluate the effectiveness of school discipline practices (Kennedy et al., 2017). Goff et al. (2014) concluded that educators persist in punishing students of color more frequently and harshly than their White peers, demonstrating the dehumanization and adultification of these students.

Concerns about lost instructional time, as well as other possible harmful side effects from suspension, being amplified by consistent findings that African American and Latino youth are overrepresented in school suspensions prompted the APA in 2005 to commission a task force to explore the impact of zero tolerance discipline policies in elementary and secondary schools. The task force completed an extensive review of the literature and found that, despite a 20-year history of implementation, there are few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero tolerance approach to school discipline. Further convoluting the results is the fact that the available data tend to contradict previously-stated assumptions. Some have argued that suspensions remove disorderly students and deter other students from misbehaving, thereby improving the school environment so well-behaving students can learn without distractions (Loosen & Skiba, 2010). However, there is no evidence to support this claim. Despite nearly 2 decades of the implementation of zero tolerance disciplinary policies and their application, there is no evidence that removing disobedient students improves school safety or student behavior (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Based on findings from the study, zero tolerance policies have far reaching consequences that negatively affect the relationship of education with the juvenile justice system and appear to conflict to some degree with current best knowledge concerning adolescent development.

Implementation of Zero Tolerance Policies

The implementation of zero tolerance policies raises important questions. According to Skiba and Rausch (2006), there are four essential purposes of school discipline: “1) to ensure the safety of students and teachers; 2) to create a climate conducive to learning; 3) to teach students skills needed for successful interaction in

school and society; and 4) to reduce rates of future misbehavior" (p. 87). Educators use punishment, with suspension and expulsion being most common, to attain the goals purported to be achievable through school discipline (Baker, 2019).

Principals who are in favor of zero tolerance have higher rates of OSS and expulsion (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). These rates reflect a belief that using suspension to remove disruptive students will create an environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn (Martinez, 2009). Fenning and Jenkins (2018) posited that it may be the intent of administrators who implement exclusionary practices to maintain a safe school environment, though research has shown these policies are neither effective nor implemented in a manner that is child-centered or equitable and often rely on personal discretion when adjudicating discipline referrals (Williams et al., 2023).

Skiba (2014) asserted that for an intervention or procedure to be effective, it must be implemented in the way in which it was intended. Unless an intervention can be implemented with some degree of consistency, it is impossible to know whether it could be effective (Skiba, 2014). Martinez (2009) generalized that school administrators continue to use zero tolerance policies as a "one-size-fits-all," "quick-fix" solution to curbing discipline problems with students (p. 153). This is best evidenced by the increasing number of suspensions. According to Wald and Losen (2015), 1.7 million students were suspended from school in the year 1974, and by 1998, the number of suspended students increased to 3.1 million. Rates of suspension and expulsion vary widely across schools and school districts. National data show OSS is used in response to a variety of behavior from fighting to insubordination, and only a small percentage of

suspensions actually occur in response to behavior that threatens the safety or security of schools (Skiba, 2014).

Dunbar and Villarruel (2002) interviewed principals from urban and rural schools in Michigan and found differences in how the principals perceived and implemented zero tolerance policies. Using a policy analysis framework, Dunbar and Villarruel explored how administrators from economically and culturally distinct communities developed an understanding of a zero tolerance policy. In some cases, the administrators modified the policy to meet the needs and culture of their districts, whereas in other situations the administrators adhered to the policy as written. The varying interpretations allowed some children to remain in school for offenses whereas others were expelled immediately for similar infractions. Their data showed zero tolerance policies adversely affect a disproportionately higher number of students of color in urban school districts. The majority of the 33 urban school principals in the study were knowledgeable about the specifics of zero tolerance policies and were likely to follow the policies as mandated. However, all eight of the rural principals interpreted and implemented zero tolerance policies with discretion. One principal from a rural area shared an incident in which a student was given the opportunity to take their hunting weapon home instead of being suspended or expelled from school. In this example, the values and hunting culture of the larger rural community influenced the principal's implementation of a policy designed for the sole purpose of keeping weapons out of school (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002).

Though this study highlights the unintended consequences of zero tolerance policies, the participants of this study were all from public schools in Michigan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other states or regions with different

demographic, cultural, and policy contexts. Factors such as local governance, state legislation, and community values likely influence how administrators interpret and implement such policies, meaning similar studies conducted in other areas may yield different results.

The Dunbar and Villarruel (2002) study supports the notion that high rates of inconsistencies in school suspension and expulsion are influenced by factors such as school climate, governance, demographics, and principal attitudes. These elements play a significant role in shaping disciplinary outcomes (Skiba et al., 2014). Such inconsistencies contribute to varying interpretations of zero tolerance policies, particularly when dealing with offenses that require subjective judgment (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018). Principals who valued and actively supported prevention-based approaches reported implementing a wider variety of such initiatives within their schools. Conversely, those who prioritized the efficiency of school discipline and felt constrained by limited resources reported offering fewer prevention programs and strategies. Research indicates there is a correlation between principals' beliefs about discipline and their actual use of school suspension (Skiba et al., 2011). This connection is further supported by the findings of Skiba et al. (2011) and Dunbar and Villarruel (2002).

According to Skiba and Rausch (2006), educators have the overwhelming task of maintaining an environment that is considered by students, parents, and teachers to be conducive for learning and safe from physical or mental harm. Historically, when students experience challenges academically, educators actively employ research-based interventions and supports; however, several scholars hold the view that when students experience behavioral challenges, educators rely on non-research-based punitive

consequences (Saeki et al., 2011; Sanon, 2017; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). The types of non-research-based punitive consequences included in this review are (a) ISS, (b) OSS, (c) expulsions, and (d) assignment to alternative schools (Welsh & Little, 2018). These are defined as the pathways to school exclusion.

Pathways to School Exclusion Through School Discipline

There are several pathways through which students are excluded from classrooms and schools due to school discipline (Welsh & Little, 2018). ISS, OSS, expulsion, and assignment to alternative school placement are all forms of exclusionary discipline practices (Welsh & Little, 2018). OSS generally entails restricting a student's school attendance for 1 or more days (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). ISS allows students to attend school but removes them to a separate location on school grounds for periods ranging from a few hours to several days (Fabelo et al., 2011; Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018). Though ISS allows students to remain in school, it still is considered a form of school exclusion because it removes students from their regular classroom setting and results in missed instructional time (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Welsh & Little, 2018). In the 2011–2012 school year, 3.5 million U.S. students received ISS and 3.45 million received OSS (OCR, 2014). In 2015–2016, students lost 11 million instructional days by the above-mentioned forms of exclusionary practices, and, as a result, school exclusion is associated with adverse educational outcomes for students (Welsh & Little, 2018). Due to a reliance on exclusionary punishment for minor misbehavior, exclusionary practices have become a common experience, particularly for racial minorities (Jacobsen et al., 2019). The use of exclusionary disciplinary sanctions has been suggested as contributing to the school-to-prison-pipeline, which refers to the

practices that push school-aged children out of the classroom and into the juvenile and criminal justice system (Skiba et al., 2014; Wald & Losen, 2015).

In-School Suspension

ISS is a disciplinary action that involves the temporary removal of a student from the learning environment and placement in a separate area or classroom for at least half of the school day (K. J. Banks, 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018). Students receive ISS for a range of behaviors, such as tardiness, classroom disruption, not attending class, and dress code violations. As an alternative to OSS, schools are increasing their use of ISS as it is viewed as a less severe option (Cholewa et al., 2018). Successful ISS programs are intended to (a) maintain school safety and order, (b) act as a preventative discipline measure, and (c) address underlying behavioral issues internally (Welsh & Little, 2018). According to Welsh and Little (2018), an effective ISS program is designed to reconnect students to the school community and to avoid lost instructional time.

ISS programs typically follow one of four models: (a) punitive, which is based on the belief that disciplinary action will correct misbehavior; (b) academic, which emphasizes instruction in basic skills to reduce misconduct; (c) therapeutic, which provides students with problem-solving support and behavioral interventions; and (d) individualized, which tailors ISS programs to address the varied reasons for misbehavior (Morris & Howard, 2003). Among these models, the punitive approach is the most widely implemented in schools across the United States (Cholewa et al., 2018; Morris & Howard, 2003; Welsh & Little, 2018).

To examine the characteristics of students most likely to receive ISS and its impact on academic outcomes, Cholewa et al. (2018) conducted a study using data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, a nationally representative dataset. Their sample included 11,860 public high school students, which, after applying primary sampling weights and adjustments for students nested within schools, represented a national population of approximately 2,993,918 students. The study found that Black students, male students, students from a lower socioeconomic status (SES), and those placed in special education were significantly more likely to receive ISS.

Additionally, Cholewa et al. (2018) identified a strong correlation between ISS and negative academic outcomes, including lower grade point averages (GPAs) and an increased likelihood of high school dropout. These findings raise concerns about the reliance on ISS, particularly as school leaders explore it as an alternative to out-of-school suspension (OSS). Given the disproportionate impact of ISS on historically marginalized student groups and its potential long-term consequences, the authors emphasized the need for further research on ISS as a disciplinary strategy, particularly in comparison to the extensive body of literature available on OSS (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

Out-of-School Suspension

According to Welsh and Little (2018), OSS is one of the harshest forms of exclusionary discipline as it results in students being sent home, oftentimes without parental supervision and a lack of structure and missed learning opportunities. When students receive OSS, they are removed from class and school for an extended period. The most common timeframe that constitutes a suspension is removal from the learning environment for 10 days or fewer; however, this is governed by state and local policy

(Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Welsh & Little, 2018). Existing research has shown the rate of OSS often rises dramatically in middle school, starting with sixth grade (Raffaele Mendez, 2003).

Raffaele Mendez (2003) examined various factors contributing to OSS and their subsequent impact on students' academic trajectories. The research highlighted a significant increase in OSS rates beginning in middle school, particularly starting in the sixth grade. This rise was attributed to a combination of developmental changes in students and the structural and environmental shifts associated with transitioning to middle school. The study also showed students who were subjected to frequent suspensions in the sixth grade were more likely to experience adverse outcomes, such as academic failure and a decreased likelihood of on-time high school graduation. These findings underscore the importance of early interventions and the need for alternative disciplinary approaches to mitigate the negative consequences associated with OSS.

OSS is the most commonly employed disciplinary procedure in schools today (C. Reed, 2024; Skiba & Sprague, 2008) and researchers have suggested schools with higher OSS rates have lower passing scores overall on state achievement tests than schools with lower rates of OSS (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). Perry and Morris (2014) supported this assertion by Noltemeyer et al. (2019), which is considered to be the first comprehensive analysis of suspension as an explanation for the racial gap in achievement. This research used data from the Kentucky School Discipline Study (Perry & Morris, 2014). All data on school discipline and test scores came directly from school records. The analysis sample included 16,248 students tested in 17 schools, providing a total of 25,221 observations over 3 years. At baseline, about 65% of the students were in Grades 6 to 8

(ages 11 to 13 years) and 35% were in Grades 9 to 10 (ages 14 to 16 years; Perry & Morris, 2014). Approximately 49% of the students in the sample were girls and 51% were boys. The majority of the students were White (59%) or Black (25%). Results confirmed that minority students are more likely to be suspended from school. Using variance decomposition methods that isolated within-student trajectories, the study showed suspension was associated with significantly lower achievement growth across time. This analysis revealed school suspensions accounted for approximately one-fifth of Black–White differences in school performance, demonstrating that exclusionary discipline may be a key driver of the racial achievement gap. Perry and Morris (2014) suggested the escalation of the use of exclusionary discipline in schools can result in severe academic consequences for minority students.

Students who receive an OSS receive less instructional time and thus have a more difficult time keeping up academically. These students may become less bonded to school, may be less motivated to achieve academic success, and may have an increased likelihood of academic failure (Huang, 2018). Losen and Martinez (2013) found, "The likelihood a student will be suspended out of school increases from 2.4% in elementary school to 11% in middle school" (p. 3). Unlike ISS, OSS has been extensively researched over multiple decades and shown to be non-effective (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

Losen (2013), using OCR data, performed an analysis of North Carolina school districts concerning first-time offenders. They found Black first-time offenders in the State of North Carolina were far more likely than White first-time offenders to be

suspended for minor offenses, including cell phone use, disruptive behavior, disrespect, and public displays of affection (Losen, 2013). According to Losen,

> the three most popular misconceptions used to justify the frequent use of suspensions are (a) suspensions improve the future behavior of students by stimulating parental involvement, (b) suspensions deter other students from misbehaving, and (c) suspensions promote favorable teaching and learning environments. (p. 392)

Skiba and Rausch (2006) reported that 95% of suspensions fell into two categories: disruptive behavior and other minor infractions.

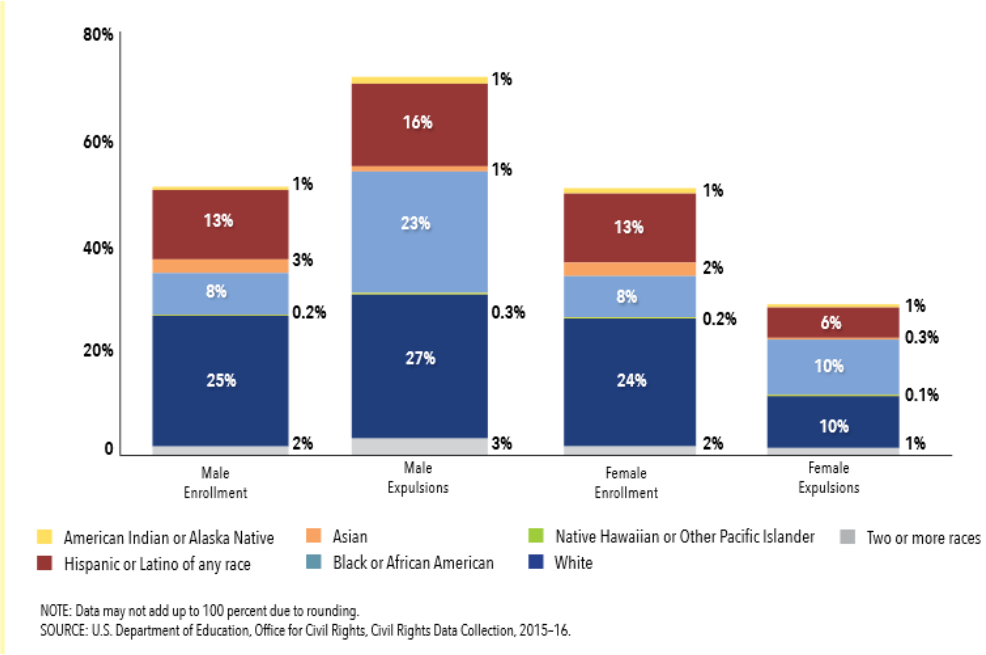
Expulsion

Expulsions are a byproduct of zero tolerance policies; schools tend to rely heavily on expulsion as their primary discipline strategy (Arcia, 2006). School expulsion refers to the permanent removal of a student from a school system for an extensive period of time (Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). Though OSS endures as the most prevalent form of exclusionary discipline, expulsion, used less frequently but requiring a longer penalty duration, is the most exclusionary form of school discipline. Expulsion, much like OSS, is exercised more heavily in secondary schools and urban environments and disproportionally affects boys (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Based on data from the OCR (2018), during the 2015–2016 school year, approximately 120,800 students (0.2% of the total number of students enrolled) received an expulsion with or without educational services. Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of students receiving expulsions by race and sex (OCR, 2018). White male students represented 25% of the students enrolled and 2% of the students who were expelled. White female students represented 24% of the students enrolled and 10% of the students who were expelled. Black male students represented 8% of the enrolled students and accounted for 23% of the students expelled. Black female students represented 8% of the student enrollment and accounted for 10%

of the students who were expelled. Latino male students accounted for 13% of the students enrolled and 16% of the students who were expelled. Latina female students accounted for 13% of the student enrollment and 6% of the students who were expelled.

Figure 2

Percentage Distribution of Students Receiving Expulsions, by Race and Sex



NOTE: Data may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015–16.

Like OSS, the expulsion period can vary from state to state over a time period of a year or permanently (Welsh, 2022). An initial expulsion recommendation can lead to expelled students being transferred to another public school, alternative school, specialized programs within the school district, online programs, private schools in other districts, or no school setting during their expulsion period (Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). According to Morrison et al. (2001), the lack of federal regulation requiring states to provide alternative education for expelled students creates precarious positions for students who have lost their right to a public education. States hold the discretionary authority to determine whether to offer alternative education to expelled students.

Placement in Alternative Schools

Educators' increased use of exclusionary discipline in the United States has led to more frequent student placements in disciplinary alternative schools (Hemmer, 2011). Assignments to alternative schools fall into the category of the most severe forms of exclusionary discipline and are likely the most disruptive for a student's academic and social development (Welsh & Swain, 2020). The definition and characteristics of alternative schools are typically determined by individual states or school districts (Lehr et al., 2009; Welsh & Swain, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Kleiner et al., 2002), the number of public alternative schools increased from 2,606 in 1993–1994 to 10,900 in the 2000–2001 school term. During the 2007–2008 school year, there were 646,500 public school students enrolled in alternative schools (Welsh & Swain, 2020). The most recent data from the NCES showed there were 435,088 public high school students enrolled in 4,548 alternative high schools during the 2014–2015 school year, representing 3% of all high school students and 17% of all public schools (Jimenez et al., 2016).

Over the past century, alternative schools evolved from schools that granted students more flexibility after the age of 16 years to the "more conservative and remedial" schools of the 1980s (Welsh, 2022, p. 855). Alternative schools are increasingly used for addressing students with suspensions and expulsions or students who display "disruptive behavior" in regular schools in many states and school districts across the United States (Lehr et al., 2009; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Welsh, 2022). States vary regarding the requirements for these disciplinary alternative schools as well as how they mandate districts or LEAs to continue to offer educational services to expelled

students (Hemmer, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2019; Welsh, 2022). Approximately 120,800 students (about 0.2% of the total student enrollment) were expelled during the 2015–2016 school year (OCR, 2018). The criteria for student placement into alternative schools vary by state and jurisdiction. Offenses that may warrant an expulsion recommendation include physical injury or harm to others, weapons possession, possession of drugs and alcohol, and terroristic threats (Heaviside et al., 1998).

Minority and low-income students tend to populate alternative schools (Welsh, 2022). Black students represent 16% of the total student enrollment but they comprise 20% of the alternative school population; LatinX students represent 25% of the total student enrollment, but 37% of the alternative school population. Low-income students represent 45% of total student enrollment but 54% of the alternative school population and (SWD account for 12% of the alternative school population (Welsh, 2022). Some scholars have argued alternative schools are one of the contributing factors that fuel or aid in the school-to-prison pipeline (Kennedy et al., 2019; Welsh, 2022). According to Huang (2018), the consequence of exclusionary discipline leads to students who receive an OSS to have less instructional time and thus have a more difficult time keeping up academically. The data presented show students of color are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline and that such practices can lead to several negative outcomes for these students.

Student Discipline Outcomes

Students who experience suspension or expulsion are more likely to face negative long-term outcomes (Davison et al., 2022). Bottiani et al. (2017) found school-level discipline gaps were significantly associated with Black students' perceptions of school

inequity, exclusion from school communities, and increased adjustment problems. These disparities persisted even after accounting for individual student demographics, such as gender, grade level, and SES, as well as broader school-level contextual factors, including SES, student diversity, and overall suspension rates.

Using an observational study, Bottiani et al. (2017) examined the Black–White discipline gap in high schools across Maryland. Their analysis employed a multilevel framework, integrating data from the OCR database and the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools (MDS3) School Climate Survey, which relied on student self-reports. The study categorized high schools based on Black students' excess risk of OSS relative to White students' risk. The findings revealed that in schools where Black students faced a disproportionately higher risk of suspension, they also reported lower perceived school equity, indicating a sense of unfair treatment in disciplinary practices. Additionally, Black students in these schools experienced reduced school belonging, suggesting exclusionary discipline practices contributed to feelings of alienation from the school community. The study further demonstrated that Black students in schools with high discipline disparities exhibited increased adjustment problems, particularly externalizing symptoms, such as acting-out behaviors linked to stress and frustration. These results underscore the broader consequences of racial disparities in school discipline, highlighting the need for equity-focused interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of exclusionary disciplinary policies on Black students' academic and emotional well-being.

Exclusionary discipline practices have been shown to be contributing factors to longer-term negative student outcomes. Welsh and Little (2018) completed the most recent systematic and comprehensive review on exclusionary discipline practices,

specifically punitive school punishment practices, and how they affect students' educational and life outcomes. In their review of 71 peer-reviewed articles published between 1990 and 2018, they found school suspensions to be the most common form of punitive punishment used in schools across the United States (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 335). When examining the outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline, Welsh and Little largely found that exclusionary practices are not only negatively related to short-term educational outcomes but also to more long-term life outcomes (p. 321). Their review indicated current disciplinary trends are tied to diminished educational achievements, lower scores on standardized tests, reduced graduation rates, decreased school attendance, and lower rates of educational matriculation (Welsh & Little, 2018). Furthermore, exclusionary discipline has been found to be positively associated with higher dropout rates, greater levels of grade retention, missed instructional time, and delays in graduation. Welsh and Little also highlighted that sanctioned youth experience increased levels of contact with the juvenile justice system, to include arrest.

Racial, gender, and income disparities are strong predictors of exclusionary disciplinary outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). SWD, non-heterosexual youth, low SES students, low-performing students, minority, and Black male students experience exclusionary discipline at higher rates than their peers (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018). These findings are consistent with previous research identifying marginalization as an important factor in student discipline outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Planty et al., 2009).

Racial, Gender, and Ethnic Disparities

Student discipline policies are necessary to ensure schools remain safe and centered on student learning. However, research has shown punitive policies reflect systematic racial disparities (DeMatthews et al., 2017) and ethnic discipline disparities have increased over the past 30 years (Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018). Disparities in student discipline practices begin at an early age. School discipline data are collected and reported biennially from every state by the OCR through the CRDC survey. According to the OCR (2014), African American preschool students represented only 18% of preschoolers in the 2011–2012 school year, but represented 48% of students receiving more than one OSS compared to White preschoolers who represented 43% of enrolled preschoolers but received 26% of more than one OSS. Beyond preschool, the disparities persist with Black students being suspended or expelled at three times the rate of their White peers (OCR, 2014; Planty et al., 2009) and being more likely to experience poverty, family instability, and other conditions that interfere with school attendance and increase behavior problems, placing them at a greater risk of suspension or expulsion (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Using child and parent reports from the Fragile Families Study, Jacobsen et al. (2019) estimated that more than one in 10 children born between 1998 and 2000 in large U.S. cities are suspended or expelled by the age of 9 years, when most are in third grade. They also found extreme racial disparity, as about 40% of non-Hispanic Black adolescent males are suspended or expelled compared to 8% of non-Hispanic White or other-race adolescent males. Further, according to Jacobson et al., disparities are largely due to differences in children's school and home environments rather than behavior problems.

Scholars have long highlighted the disproportionate representation of Black males in exclusionary practices (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). Black adolescent male students account for the largest percentage of students receiving the harshest exclusionary disciplinary consequences (Welsh, 2022). DeMatthews et al. (2017) found that in the eyes of teachers and school leaders, Black adolescent males in the elementary grades were deemed as unsalvageable, viewed by their teachers as mannish, intentional wrongdoers and were, thus, "adultified." In addition, the study purported teachers viewed similar actions from White adolescent males as innocent and punished them with persuasion and edification. These forms of individual prejudice support institutional and societal forms of racism with implications for disciplinary decisions.

Over the past decade, Black adolescent females have faced a significant rise in suspension rates, surpassing all other student demographics. Black girls nationwide face suspension rates six times higher than their White female peers and encounter disciplinary actions surpassing 67% of males across all racial and ethnic groups (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017; OCR, 2014). These disparities exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline and perpetuate systemic obstacles to educational success.

Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) critically examined how zero tolerance policies disproportionately affect Black girls, influencing their identity development and perpetuating systemic biases. Using Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and the concept of figured worlds, the authors explored how school discipline policies reflect White, patriarchal norms that marginalize Black girls. These frameworks highlight the ways in which Black girls' identities are shaped by educational environments that often criminalize behaviors that are misaligned with the dominant expectations of White

femininity. As a result, Black girls are disproportionately disciplined for expressions perceived as disruptive or defiant, which leads to social stigmatization, academic disengagement, and emotional distress.

The implementation of zero tolerance policies perpetuates anti-Black disciplinary practices by reinforcing societal biases that judge Black girls' behavior more harshly than their peers (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). This differential treatment reflects broader systemic issues, where disciplinary actions are embedded with racial and gendered prejudices, further marginalizing Black girls in educational spaces. Such exclusionary discipline policies heighten their risk of being pushed out of school, leading to increased dropout rates, involvement in the criminal justice system, and future economic insecurity (Crenshaw et al., 2015; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017).

Black feminine expression has been understood in the context of stereotypes of Black adolescent females as sassy, hypersexual, and combative (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017). Additionally, E. W. Morris and Perry (2017) implied that this perspective kindles the school pushout that Black adolescent females and adolescent females of color are experiencing within schools in the United States. School pushout, endorsed by school discipline policies, is the manifestation of a dominant racist mentality that is responsible for how society responds to and misunderstands adolescent females of color (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017). Stereotypes of being "loud" and "angry" have become normalized descriptors of Black adolescent females, and the slightest preview of a non-dominant expression of femininity often times causes school professionals to respond in a harmful way, whether through embarrassment, over-discipline, or physical violence (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017).

González and Epstein (2022), in their seminal work, sought to determine whether adults assign Black adolescent females qualities that render them more like adults and less innocent than their White peers. They surveyed 325 adults from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and different educational levels across the United States who were recruited through an online service to obtain a community sample of typical adults. Participants were predominantly White (74%) and female (62%). The results of the study indicated Black adolescent females are perceived as less innocent and more adult-like than are White adolescent females, especially when they are between the ages of 5 and 14 years, which results in disparities in school and the criminal justice system. This study revealed that, among other misconceptions, adults think Black adolescent females seem older than White adolescent females of the same age, know more about sex, and need less support and comfort (González & Epstein, 2022). Similarly, E. W. Morris and Perry's (2017) work supported this notion as a series of interviews with Black females ages 15 to 23 years revealed educators demonstrate less patience and care toward Black adolescent females when they do not meet the expectations of educators.

Annamma et al. (2018) conducted a study examining exclusionary discipline outcomes among Black adolescent females in a large urban school district in Denver. Using a sequential mixed methods design, the researchers first performed a quantitative analysis followed by a qualitative inquiry to provide deeper insight into disciplinary disparities. Their study was grounded in CRT and Critical Race Feminism (FemCrit), frameworks that highlight how dominant societal narratives shape perceptions of Black adolescent females and influence disciplinary practices both historically and in contemporary education settings.

The researchers analyzed a cross-sectional dataset that included all disciplined female students (N = 3,628) in Grades K to 12 who were enrolled in Denver Public Schools (DPS) during the 2011–2012 school year. Although Black females comprised 29% of the disciplined female population, they made up only 15% of the total female student body, demonstrating a stark racial disparity in school discipline. Annamma et al. (2018) found that Black adolescent females were disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline for subjective infractions, such as obedience and defiance, detrimental behavior, and third-degree assault, which often relied on the discretionary judgment of school personnel. Conversely, White adolescent females were more likely to receive suspensions for objective infractions, such as drug and alcohol possession, which are generally classified as more serious offenses.

These findings align with previous research on racial disparities in school discipline, which suggested Black students, particularly females, are disproportionately disciplined for behaviors that are open to interpretation and bias (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). This study reinforces the need for a critical examination of disciplinary policies and practices, as well as the implicit biases that contribute to inequitable educational outcomes for Black adolescent females. Few scholars have thoroughly investigated why Black females are subjected to this differential treatment. However, the findings surrounding the adultification of Black adolescent females may shed new light on a potential cause of these trends. Similar to Black adolescent females, there has been little or inconsistent research involving other ethnicities, specifically LatinX students (Schaeffer, 2019).

LatinX students are the fastest-growing demographic in the U.S. educational system (Kena et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015a, 2015b). At present, LatinX students constitute 24.3% of the student population in the nation (Kena et al., 2015). The U.S. Census Bureau predicted that the LatinX school-age population will increase 166% by the year 2050 (from 11 million to 28 million) whereas non-LatinX students will increase by only 4% (from 43 million to 45 million; Pew Research Center, 2015a, 2015b). Research shows LatinX students account for the highest U.S. high school dropout rate (9.2%), outnumbering all racial groups (Kena et al., 2016). Among the primary factors associated with educational underachievement are the types of disciplinary actions enacted by the U.S. educational system (Gregory et al., 2010). Research indicates LatinX students experience a disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline within the United States beginning in the sixth grade (Gregory et al., 2010; Moreno & Segura-Herrera, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011). Furthermore, studies have shown LatinX students experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline interventions and disciplinary referrals in comparison to their White student counterparts (Arcia, 2006; Heilbrun et al., 2018; Noguera, 2003).

In brief, the overrepresentation of minorities in exclusionary practices, particularly Black males, has serious implications, such as further exclusionary discipline, increased dropout rates, and involvement with the criminal justice system, all of which contribute to the school-to-prison-pipeline (Schaeffer, 2019). There has been little and inconsistent research involving this topic and other ethnicities, specifically Black females and LatinX students. The purpose of this section was to shed new light on these subgroups and explain the impact of exclusionary practices on these populations

and potential causes. Another predictor of students' involvement in exclusionary discipline is students with disabilities (SWD).

Students With Disabilities

Today's educational system is extremely complex, and it is imperative for school leaders to be skilled in balancing the competing demands of meeting both the individual needs and protecting the best interests of all students. This is especially crucial when deciding ethically and acting morally in cases involving SWD (Frick et al., 2013). The federal government acknowledges that students' disability status must be taken into consideration when determining disciplinary action (Sanon, 2017). Students identified with a disability represent only 12% of students enrolled in public school, but even with federal provisions, they represent 26% of the students who receive an OSS and 24% of those students who are expelled (OCR, 2019).

Although discriminating against SWD through classroom segregation is no longer legal, there is evidence that exclusionary discipline is being used as an alternative method to continued discrimination, particularly as SWD are perceived as a threat (Williams et al., 2023). In U.S. public schools, the percentage of SWD suspended due to a discipline violation is triple the rate of students without disabilities (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

The thought of SWD as a potential threat may contribute to the disproportionate discipline rates of SWD (Fabelo et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2023). Williams et al. (2023) reviewed 19 studies related to school administrators' perceptions of SWD. Though only 9% of the reviewed studies reported administrators' perceptions of SWD as a personal threat to their physical or material safety, 62% of the studies reported SWD

were perceived as a threat to the school's organizational power, resources, and general welfare. Additionally, Williams et al. purported that SWD often challenge the philosophies, beliefs, and assumptions held by school administrators.

Williams et al. (2023) surveyed 150 school administrators to examine factors influencing their disciplinary decisions regarding SWD. Their findings revealed that administrators' perceptions of SWD as a threat significantly affected disciplinary actions, particularly for students identified with emotional impairments. This aligns with previous research indicating students with emotional impairments are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled compared to students in other disability categories (Cobb-Clark et al., 2015; Cooley, 1995; Duran, 2020; Garnett, 2014; Krezmien et al., 2014).

The high rates of suspension and expulsion among SWD reinforce school administrators' perceptions that these students pose potential threats, which in turn exacerbates the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline (Fabelo et al., 2011; Krezmien et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014). This cycle disproportionately affects students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, further marginalizing them within the educational system. Similar to other student subgroups, administrators' perceptions play a crucial role in determining how frequently they rely on exclusionary disciplinary practices for SWD.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Similar to SWD, students' economic status has affected their rates of suspension. Students with socioeconomic disparities are frequently measured by enrollment in free and reduced priced lunch programs and this is an area in which research findings are shifting (Whitford et al., 2016). Golann (2015), drawing from 18 months of ethnographic

fieldwork inside a no-excuses school, provided valuable insights into the practices and culture of such educational environments. No-excuses charter schools are accredited for serving mostly low-income students of color in prep-school-like environments with high academic expectations, strict codes of behavior, and extended school days or years. After interviewing 92 school administrators, Golann found teachers' pedagogical and social control strategies varied by their students' social class backgrounds; teachers emphasized rule compliance and rote behavior with low-income minority students, but they emphasized expression, independence, and negotiation with students from upper socioeconomic classes (Golann, 2015). Teachers favor students who do their homework, demonstrate mastery of skills, communicate well, and are well-mannered (Welsh & Little, 2018).

Nichols (2004) analyzed student discipline data from a large school district (37,000 students) and reported significant correlations between OSS and SES. The purpose of this study was to expand the analysis to include data from six high schools, 11 middle schools, and 35 elementary schools in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The analysis of student discipline data was presented with a discussion centering on the overrepresentation of minority and low-income students (Nichols, 2004). These results were consistent with other studies that reported an overrepresentation of students from low socioeconomic households in exclusionary school discipline (Little & Welsh, 2019; Skiba et al., 2014). In a more recent study, Shabazian (2020) explored how community SES, geographical location, and administrator perspectives influenced the implementation of exclusionary disciplinary policies. Using Geographical Information Systems mapping technology, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis, Shabazian

found that schools located in high SES sectors have higher rates of exclusionary disciplinary practices, whereas schools located in low SES sectors have lower levels. The findings also revealed five normative values that influence leadership's decisions to exclude students more frequently: productive efficiency, equality versus equity, the potential of legal liability, prescribing to a cultural deficit ideology, and the notion of strict surveillance (Shabazian, 2020). A contributing factor to the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline among students in poverty may be rooted in the theory of the pathology of poverty, which often permeates societal and educational discourse (Sanon, 2017). Furthermore, there is a prevailing characterization of poor people as individuals who cannot think abstractly, lack planning behavior and self-governance, and are inclined toward criminal activity if their impulsivity is not kept in check. Economic disparities may result in students in poverty having inadequate educational opportunities, which decreases their access to educational opportunities such as college or workforce readiness (Osei-Kofi, 2005). The inequalities are compounded because students from low-SES households are generally provided with limited access to high quality health care, quality childcare, housing, and appropriate nutrition (Kozol, 2005).

In critiquing Ruby Payne and the notion of a "culture of poverty," Osei-Kofi (2005) challenged the pathology of poverty theory. Similar critiques denounced the deficit notions outlined in Payne's widely accepted work (Bomer et al., 2008). These deficit notions of students from poverty may serve to undermine efforts aimed at improving the educational opportunities provided to these students (Sanon, 2017). Educators who embrace this way of thinking are susceptible to having lower expectations for the students they serve based largely in part on students' SES (Osei-Kofi, 2005).

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline is a metaphor that encompasses the various issues in the nation's education system that result in students leaving school and becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Redfield & Nance, 2016). This epidemic has alarming implications for students of color having access to an equal education (McNeal, 2016). The school-to-prison pipeline is a disturbing trend that funnels marginalized students out of K-12 schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Fowler, 2017; McConville, 2019; McNeal, 2016; Wilson, 2014). Fowler (2017) described this as a systematic approach employed by schools to make "discretionary decisions to suspend, expel, or criminalize student misbehavior, which contributes to student pushout, dropout, and ultimately to what researchers refer to as the school-to-prison pipeline" (p. 16). It is also known as the "schoolhouse to jailhouse track" or, as younger and younger students are targeted, "the cradle to prison track" (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 2). McNeal (2016) cited a study conducted in Washington State, analyzing data from school districts with 1,000 or more students. The study showed that, on average, school districts with low suspension/expulsion rates had graduation rates that were 23 percentage points higher than those with high discipline rates. Researchers have consistently found that minority students experience suspension and expulsion at disproportionately higher rates than their White peers. A study conducted by the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University (Carmichael et al., 2005) identified a history of disciplinary referrals as the strongest predictor of future involvement in the juvenile justice system (Fowler, 2017, p. 16). The use of exclusionary discipline in schools mirrors broader societal attitudes toward punishment, reinforcing the belief that removing certain students benefits the

larger school community (Sanon, 2017). This perspective aligns with societal views on criminal behavior, where punitive approaches aim to separate individuals perceived as disruptive from those deemed compliant. As Noguera (2003) argued, the students most frequently subjected to exclusionary discipline in schools often mirror the populations disproportionately represented in the prison system, further entrenching cycles of marginalization and exclusion. To gain a better understanding of the relationship between schools and prison, Wacquant (1999) provided an extensive analysis of precipitating factors leading to the current disproportionality in today's prison population. The sociologist described four major periods in history designed to oppress African Americans in the United States: slavery, Jim Crow, ghetto, and hyperghetto. The hyperghetto period is marked by classism, decreased economic opportunity, loss of community organizations and communal groups, and an increased sense of prisonization of everyday life. According to Wacquant, in the current hyperghetto era, inner-city public schools largely operate in similar ways as prisons. Students are herded into dilapidated and often overcrowded buildings where they receive instruction from under-paid and under-trained teachers (Wacquant, 1999). Additionally, this alludes that the emphasis in these institutions is not on educating students, but on ensuring rigid control and order. The obsession with maintaining order and control in schools often results in adversarial relationships between teachers and students (Noguera, 2003).

Scholars have observed a shift in school discipline aimed at criminalizing student misbehavior in similar ways as the criminal justice system (Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Welch & Payne, 2010). McNeal (2016) posited that several factors contribute to the development and perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline,

and the following factors collectively have played the most significant role in the evolution of this phenomenon: (a) the emergence of "get tough on crime" rhetoric, (b) a reactionary response to mass school shootings, and (c) the expansion of the role of law enforcement personnel in schools. The similarities between schools and prisons extend beyond the physical presence of visible security measures.

Tredway et al. (2007) suggested school administrators in urban school settings often take on the role of detective and enforcer when conducting student discipline. School administrators often borrow terms from the criminal justice system to describe the many aspects of their work. Terms such as offender, interrogation, suspects, witness statements, evidence, and investigation are commonplace in the administrative discourse concerning student discipline (Sanon, 2017). The use of security mechanisms in the form of surveillance systems, drug-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, school resource officers, surveillance cameras, and rigid zero tolerance policies has increased in today's schools (Hemez et al., 2019; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Sanon, 2017; Wacquant, 1999). According to OCR (2019) data,

> 1.6 million students attend a school with a sworn law enforcement officer (SLEO) but not a school counselor and by the 2015-16 academic year, schools reported having more than 27,000 school resource officers (SROs), compared to 23,000 social workers. LatinX, Asian, and black students were all more likely than white students to attend a school with an SLEO but not a counselor. (p. 4)

When viewed in this way, the influence of the criminal justice system on the public school system is clear (Sanon, 2017). Little and Welsh (2019) posited "mass incarceration, the justice system, and the racial discipline gap in schools are interconnected in profound and complex ways" (p. 5). Hemez et al. (2019) endeavored to examine the empirical relationship between school suspensions in adolescence and incarceration during young adulthood. Leveraging 15 waves of data from the 1997

National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), results of mixed-effects models overall demonstrated a significant positive relationship between school suspensions experienced during adolescence and the odds of later imprisonment, the net effect of key controls such as levels of crime and delinquency.

Root Causes for Student Discipline Outcomes

Research has shown that various biases, lack of preparation, and racism in urban schools influence school discipline practices and outcomes for marginalized students (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Fabelo et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2023). According to Welch and Payne (2010), there are quite a few intriguing explanations that contribute to "racial disparate" discipline (p. 26). These include disproportionate involvement in delinquency (Noguera 2003), more involvement in zero tolerance violations, perceptions of misbehavior resulting from racial stereotypes or bias (Nichols, 2004; Skiba & Peterson, 1999a), and the "adultification" of Black students by school personnel (Ferguson, 2020). Welch and Payne (2010) used a national sample of 294 public schools, and their study was the first to test the racial threat hypothesis within schools to determine whether the racial composition of students predicts the greater use of punitive controls regardless of levels of misbehavior and delinquency. Results of multivariate analyses supported the racial threat perspective, finding that schools with a larger percentage of Black students were not only more likely to use punitive disciplinary responses but also more likely to use extremely punitive discipline and to implement zero tolerance policies (Welch & Payne, 2010).

Williams et al. (2023) asserted that collectively, there are a number of factors that can create these disparities, such as intercultural conflict and racial threat (Gregory et al.,

2010; Welch & Payne, 2010), a lack of classroom management implementation by teachers (Williams et al., 2023), and implicit and explicit cultural/racial bias (Gregory et al., 2010), factors that go regularly unaddressed. According to Greenwald and Banaji (1995), implicit bias affects decision making automatically, or without conscious thought. Implicit biases can be considered a cognitive shortcut for making an array of quick decisions in a complex society (McIntosh et al., 2018). Research from the field of social psychology showed implicit bias is more likely to influence specific decisions, such as those that are ambiguous or require snap judgments, or when individuals are physically or mentally fatigued (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014).

The other root cause highlighted by Williams et al. (2023) was teacher preparation. The role of teacher preparation and training was reflected in Blaisdell's (2016) study, which showed that when attempting to rationalize the lower levels of academic achievement for students of color, teachers and school administrators often relied on cultural deficiency arguments that blamed students, their families, and their cultural orientations for their academic failures. This finding has been echoed in other studies on the ways in which school administrators and teachers blame Black and LatinX cultures or families for their children's academic deficits and discipline problems (Anyon et al., 2018). Yet, research indicates parents of color have fewer resources and are given fewer opportunities by school staff to challenge exclusionary discipline decisions (Kupchik, 2009; Reyes, 2006). Consequently, many students' biggest advocates, their parents, are neither equipped nor given the same opportunities to negotiate the school system in defense of their child. At the same time, these families are assigned blame for discipline problems, often resulting in the alienation of the child and parent from school.

Victim blaming is a common dynamic that informs teacher perceptions and is a characteristic of deficit thinking, according to Reyes (2006).

Deficit thinking legitimates the notion that marginalized students behave poorly. Valencia (2010) defined deficit thinking, in the context of schools, as blaming students for their own internal deficiencies. For example, "The student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest . . . in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior" (p. 7). This definition of deficit thinking is pivotal to framing how one perceives the behavior exhibited by marginalized students. Baker (2019) contended that microaggressions are another possible explanation for why Black students are overrepresented in terms of suspension/expulsion for defiance. Baker offered a revision of the Baker framework, "which troubles deficit notions of overrepresentation in the disciplinary category of defiance by offering a different conceptualization of African American students being labeled defiant" (p. 103). The author asserted that what teachers define as defiant behaviors by students are often a response to microaggressions (Baker, 2019). To give explanation and how microaggressions are internalized, Sue et al. (2008) classified microaggression into three subcategories:

> 1. Microassaults—clear, obvious, and blatant racism that is readily apparent to a student. However, this is less likely to occur in schools with significant Black populations.
>
> 2. Microinsults—actions that convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person's racial identity or heritage. This becomes apparent in school when student difference is negated and White middle-class values are ascribed.
>
> 3. Microinvalidation—actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of people of color. (p. 331)

It is reasonable to conclude that the achievement disparities among students from minoritized groups, in part, could be due to the cultural mismatch between home and school, to educational leaders' lack of cultural knowledge and skills, as well as to deficit thinking about culturally diverse groups (Barakat et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2010). Educators who lack cultural competence often hold negative beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and their families. This inclination to view students from diverse backgrounds as inherently deficient stems from an ethnocentric stance that regards any divergence from the dominant culture as being wrong or inferior (Barakat et al., 2020; S. W. Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Shields and Hesbol (2020) argued that "until mind-sets change, and both implicit bias and deficit assumptions are overcome, then equity, inclusion, and social justice will remain illusory" (p. 18). Implicit bias, deficit thinking, microaggressions, and cultural mismatch affect students and their connections and reactions to teachers. These consistently negative interactions unfortunately dismantle relationships between students and teachers (Baker, 2019).

Principals and Student Outcomes

Though public schools have become more diverse racially and economically, the principalship has remained relatively homogeneous and middle class. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), 14.2% of school administrators are Black, 10.6% identify as Latino, and 3.8% are Asian American or Pacific Islander, revealing a lack of ethnic diversity among administrators. Kemp-Graham (2015) asserted that more likely than not, a large percentage of administrators today have very little connection to the histories and cultures of the students with whom they interact on a daily basis. Kemp-

Graham added that the disconnect between students and leadership has contributed to the widening of the achievement gaps, disproportionate student discipline, and high school dropout rates in the United States (Kemp-Graham, 2015). Given the compounding significance of race and the use of exclusionary discipline, these statistics bear relevance (Williams et al., 2023).

Educational leaders are critical to responding racial disparities, as they can affect student achievement and school improvement by creating a positive school culture, empowering the individuals they serve, and forming meaningful partnerships with the community (Barakat et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004). Kemp-Graham (2015) explained that "bold" leadership is needed to effectively transform 21st-century schools into institutions of learning that promote equity and access to high-quality education and the expectation of academic success for all students. DeMatthews (2020) added that effective principals have been found to positively influence organizational processes and working conditions through shaping faculty and student expectations, school mission and vision, and time and resource utilization.

The most common standards for administrative licensure, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), originally did not include equity-oriented language. This led to questions about the effectiveness of that set of leadership standards in providing the anticipated direction, guidance, and insight (B. W. Davis et al., 2015). However, in 2015, a revision of the ISLLC standards resulted in their replacement with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). The recently updated PSEL (NPBEA, 2015) are described as "guideposts . . . Grounded in current research and the real-life experiences of educational leaders" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 1). Standard 3 highlights

that effective educational leaders "confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). According to DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020), the new PSEL reflect a growing awareness that principals need to address social and educational inequities. Despite this awareness, the PSEL do not focus specifically on addressing racism or related educational inequities (DeMatthews, 2020).

DeMatthews et al. (2017) stated school-based administrators are partly responsible for the racial discipline gap. If a school district mandates the implementation of exclusionary discipline for a specific offense, the building-level administrator is responsible for carrying out the directive accordingly. Williams et al. (2023) stated, "In the realm of zero tolerance, however, the ambiguity surrounding what offenses warrant a zero-tolerance consequence is confounded" (p. 1543). It is left up to the discretion of the school principal to determine how behaviors that warrant suspension are adjudicated. Principals play a pivotal role in setting the procedural and cultural norms for their school because their decisions can affect the entire institution. In support of the above statement, Skiba et al. (2003) surveyed 267 principals' attitudes toward school discipline practices. The surveys were completed for a response rate of just over 14%. This online survey, the Disciplinary Practices Scale, was developed to collect data on principals' perceptions and practices related to school discipline. For each of the 60 questions, respondents were asked to indicate their response using a 5-point Likert scale. Results of the factor analysis indicated there were clear and identifiable differences in perspectives among school principals on certain dimensions of school discipline. Further, Skiba et al.'s findings

revealed schools with a higher rate of suspension tended to have principals who believed that suspension and zero tolerance are effective, that special education disciplinary regulations interfere with a principal's ability to discipline, that the home situation is responsible for disciplinary problems, that resources are insufficient, and that violence is increasing. In contrast, schools with a lower rate of school suspension were associated with a principal who believed suspension is a last resort that hurts student learning by providing less engaged time and that the school has a responsibility to teach appropriate behavior. Together, these results show principals' perspectives on discipline (a) are not shaped only by student behavior, and (b) make a difference in terms of school programming (Skiba et al., 2003). Principals' beliefs play an important role in how student discipline is carried out in schools. DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) asserted, "While principals are not superheroes who can reverse harmful federal, state, or district policies that marginalize students, they have the positional authority to disrupt, dislocate, and destabilize asymmetrical power relations and other marginalizing conditions within schools" (p. 363) and have the power to keep students in school as much as possible (Skiba et al., 2014).

Administrators on a daily basis encounter situations where they must use personal discretion, resulting in cases of students being excluded for instances of sharing cough drops and mints, the sharing of inhalers with students in need, possession of a homemade rocket, and possession of nail clippers (Skiba & Peterson, 1999a; Skiba et al., 2003). When a teacher is confronted with a misbehaving student, the teacher has to determine whether the offense is serious enough to refer the student to administration for disciplinary action. Principals and APs are the ones with the final say regarding whether

the behavior referred warrants suspension (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2019). According to Jarvis and Okonofua (2019), principals' perspectives may differ from those of teachers in two distinct ways. It is common for administrators not to witness the troubling behavior, and they must rely on others to recount the incident. While adjudicating an offense, principals must take into account the safety of the entire school, and "it is crucial to consider the perspective of principals in the disciplinary process in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how racial disparities in suspension rates occur" (Jarvis, & Okonofua, 2019, p. 493) and how best to employ research-based interventions to disrupt exclusionary practices.

Young et al. (2010) conducted an exploratory study to assess administrators' perceptions of their ability to implement a diversity plan in a demographically diverse school district undergoing strategic changes to address shifting student demographics. To gain authentic insights, the researchers conducted interviews with 34 participants, including one board member, three district administrators, 22 principals, and eight teachers. The findings revealed principals struggled to define "diversity" in a way that translated into strategic implementation and did not recognize the importance of addressing demographic changes in their schools. Furthermore, they were unprepared to lead diversity initiatives or manage conflicts arising from diverse student populations. Though the principals demonstrated a general awareness of diversity, they lacked the confidence and skills necessary to effectively engage teachers and parents in diversity-related discussions and initiatives.

The importance of reflecting on school discipline practices is compounded by the outcomes experienced by those who are disproportionately exposed to exclusionary

discipline—students of color, SWD, and students experiencing poverty. Though some school leaders are ready to address issues of race and inequality head on (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011), others report being ill prepared to address diversity-related issues in their schools (Young et al., 2010).

Closing the Racial Discipline Gap Within Exclusionary Practices

Exclusionary practice policies have been in place for 4 decades, and according to Wilson (2014), these policies will not disappear just because researchers or federal officials declare the practice an "abject failure" (p. 51). Many administrators, teachers, parents, and students have come to believe punitive discipline is necessary to maintain order and control in schools (Wilson, 2014). As a result, pervasive gaps continue to be of interest and concern for educational and psychological professionals, who have introduced a framework for increasing equity in school discipline (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Preventative measures include the following:

> Supportive relationships, bias-aware classrooms, and respectful school environments, academic rigor, culturally relevant and responsive teaching, and opportunities for learning and correcting behavior. Interventions included: data-based inquiry and equity, problem-solving approaches to discipline, the inclusion of student voice on conflicts' causes and solutions, and reintegration of students after conflict or absence. A preventative and intervention principle was that schools use a tiered framework to match increasing levels of intensity of support to students' differentiated needs, or multi-tiered system of supports. (Wilson, 2014, p. 51)

By 2016, the nation's 100 largest school districts had implemented policy reforms that limit the use of suspensions or require less punitive discipline strategies (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). According to Lacoe and Steinberg (2018), this action was in response to research-based evidence of the repercussions of exclusionary discipline policies. School district leaders sought to adopt alternative approaches in the hopes of lowering the

numbers of suspensions and expulsions, and thus improving student outcomes (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018) and promoting prosocial student behavior (Sanon, 2017).

The upcoming subsections explore the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force's (2008) recommendations to address and assist in zero tolerance reforms. The first calls for leaders of schools and districts to train educators to use culturally responsive behavior management and instruction techniques and to provide training so faculty and staff members can address sensitivity related to issues of race. The APA maintains that professional learning and training (i.e., educational leadership programs) are essential in changing adult mindsets from the traditional approach to discipline to a restorative approach (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Providing educators with professional development (PD) and training focused on understanding the sensitive issues of race and class is paramount to addressing zero tolerance discipline policies and practices (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Along with PD and training, the APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force recommends "develop[ing] a planned continuum of effective alternatives for those students whose behavior threatens the discipline or safety of the school" (p. 859). The effective alternative supports and interventions that are explored in the upcoming subsections are educational leadership programs and continuous learning for administrators, restorative practices (RP), multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), schoolwide positive behavioral interventions support (SWPBIS), and cultural responsiveness and positive behavior interventions support (CRPBIS).

Educational Leadership Programs and Continuous Learning for Administrators

The recent political climate in the United States has led to challenges to issues of equity and access, bringing to the forefront the need to further engage leaders in the field

of educational leadership in discussions of race, class, gender, and other areas of social justice and equity (Guillaume et al., 2019). Educational leaders must be equipped to meet the needs of marginalized students (Theoharis, 2007). A growing concern among educators is whether school leaders are prepared to face the enormous pressures and advocate for the rights and education for all children (McIntosh et al., 2018).

Educational reformers have long claimed school leadership is a crucial component in any reform, secondary only to the very act of teaching (Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004). More recent research has shown a relationship between the presence of an effective principal and increased student achievement scores on standardized assessments, higher student attendance rates, and higher graduation rates (Branch et al., 2012; Coelli & Green, 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2012). Khalifa et al. (2016) posited that developing effective leaders is a vital part of the process of recruiting and retaining teachers for children who have been marginalized and stated this process is a crucial strategy for closing the racial discipline gap and improving schools.

In reaction to the shifting climate and the social systems in which school leaders work, a greater demand exists in the field of educational leadership to investigate how leaders are prepared to address social justice issues (Carpenter et al., 2017). In their study, Guillaume et al. (2019) highlighted how graduates from one educational leadership program relied on their academic knowledge and applied critical leadership (ACL) to operationalize social justice praxis. The researchers used a phenomenological approach and conducted 10 semi-structured interviews. Guillaume et al. examined how their participants perceived their graduate preparation and how this program assisted them in developing their understanding of social justice and in creating socially just educational

communities. In addition, the researchers looked at how graduates of this social justice program were able to use the ACL framework to create socially just communities through their roles as leaders.

The findings showed a curriculum based on social justice influenced the participants' understanding of social justice leadership and their development of critical consciousness. The ACL theory suggests the principles of critical pedagogy and critical race theory are key in building critical thought and "meaningful dialogue" about social justice (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, p. 4). There were three implications for practice directed at educational leadership graduate preparation programs. First, it is clear from this study that graduates from this program were able to create real and meaningful change in their PK-12 settings in large part due to the knowledge they gained through the successful completion of their graduate preparation program. Second, Santamaría and Santamaría's (2012) study provided supporting evidence to show programs that espouse social justice philosophies in their mission should focus attention on leadership, in particular the use of transformational leadership to create sustainable change. Third, the results of this study show graduate preparation programs should focus on literature that is situated within education for change, championing the message for SJLs to advocate on behalf of marginalized students.

Providing educators with ongoing PD focused on race and class is essential for addressing the inequities embedded in zero tolerance discipline policies and practices (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). A key component of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) is a commitment to continuous learning about cultural knowledge and context, a principle adapted from Gardiner and Enomoto (2006), who

used a cross-case analysis to explore how school leaders respond to diversity and develop multicultural leadership skills.

Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) examined six principals, two from secondary schools and four from elementary schools, working in an urban school district where the student population was predominantly White, with a small number of minority students and an ELL program serving students who spoke 56 different languages. The principals had limited formal multicultural training, yet their responses to diversity were analyzed through three critical multicultural leadership practices: fostering new understandings about diversity, promoting inclusive instructional practices, and strengthening school community connections.

Findings indicated the principals developed multicultural leadership skills through experience and peer socialization rather than structured training. To better prepare school leaders, Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) recommended collaborations between principals and university faculty to examine educational laws and policies, conduct curriculum audits for bias and stereotyping, and integrate research based instructional strategies. They emphasized that school district leaders must explicitly incorporate multiculturalism into mission statements and policies to ensure institutional support for diversity efforts. Additionally, they encouraged school principals to engage in self-reflection regarding their biases, backgrounds, and values, leading them to prioritize PD opportunities that expand their cultural competence and understanding of diverse communities.

Freire (1998) argued that the fundamental purpose of education is to create opportunities that empower students and challenge systemic inequities. He emphasized that public education has both the responsibility and moral obligation to dismantle

oppression and promote social justice. Similarly, Moses and Cobb (2002) contended that educators serve as frontline civil rights advocates, playing a crucial role in the ongoing struggle for equity in education. Barakat et al. (2020) further emphasized that educational programs that incorporate social justice principles and foster cultural diversity can enhance the cultural competence of graduates, equipping them to navigate and address issues of equity in their professional practice.

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices (RP) refers to a range of approaches that can be used to prevent conflict or intervene when an incident has occurred (Huang & Anyon, 2020). RP has been an integral part of the discipline reform efforts undertaken in various school districts across the United States (Fronius et al., 2016). RP is a branch of restorative justice, defined by Zehr (2015) as "a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" (p. 37). The use of RP in education emerged from Indigenous or pre-colonial systems of conflict resolution and the subsequent development of RP in criminal and juvenile justice systems internationally (Fronius et al., 2016). According to McNeill et al. (2016), RP can change the culture of a school and greatly improve the school climate. Research shows schools that implement RP programs see a lowered reliance on detention and suspension; a decline in disciplinary problems, truancy, and dropout rates; and an improvement in school climate and student attitudes (McNeill et al., 2016).

However, Huang and Anyon (2020) noted that though the use of RP has gained traction in school districts across the United States, empirical research on its effectiveness

has been limited in scope, generalizability, and validity. In their study, they analyzed data from 30,799 secondary school students in a large urban district, matching student-level survey responses with discipline records to examine the relationship between disciplinary resolutions and students' perceptions of school climate. Specifically, they investigated how different disciplinary outcomes influenced perceptions of disciplinary structure, supportive relationships, school bonding, disengagement, and safety. Their findings indicated students who received suspensions held more negative views of school climate and had weaker connections to school compared to peers with no disciplinary infractions.

Huang and Anyon (2020) also referenced a growing body of literature demonstrating that exclusionary discipline practices are associated with a range of negative academic and social outcomes. They suggested RP offers a promising alternative for addressing behavioral infractions by promoting conflict resolution and relationship-building within schools. Supporting this perspective, McNeill et al. (2016) argued that RP fosters students' social and emotional development by equipping them with essential skills for building and maintaining relationships with peers, teachers, family members, and the broader community.

Supports and Interventions

Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is considered an umbrella framework designed to support the whole child (e.g., academic, behavior, and social) by establishing a data-driven process that assists school leaders in identifying struggling students and providing them with interventions to support their ongoing progress (Horner et al., 2010). The creation of an MTSS functions as a structured way to provide resources and support for students with social/emotional challenges. According to Benner et al. (2013):

> Consistent with the core principles of MTSS, positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) uses a continuum of behavioral interventions to understand and meet youth social, emotional, and behavioral needs. PBIS is an MTSS framework for behavior, establishing the social culture and behavioral supports needed for schools to be effective learning environments for all youth . . . PBIS holds particular promise for students with or at-risk for Emotional/Behavior Disorder (E/BD) as a unified structure to (a) prevent the development of E/BD and (b) address existing instances. (p. 16)

PBIS is a tool that can be used to support all students, especially those who are at-risk. Further research showed MTSS, along with PBIS, will provide support to students and help reduce the achievement gap and the school-to-prison pipeline (Benner et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2014).

The school-wide positive behavior intervention and supports (SWPBIS) approach is a school-wide prevention and intervention model that proactively improves school behavior issues. This approach has been successful, in part, due to its whole-school focus (T. Banks & Obiakor, 2015). Difficult behavioral issues that affect the school climate and safety, such as bullying and aggression, have proven difficult to remedy through small-scale interventions limited to a single classroom or subset of students (T. Banks & Obiakor, 2015). The application of SWPBIS is intended to improve school safety and climate within districts and campuses.

As a systems-level framework, SWPBIS has been used in many schools to leverage best practices to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, ensure students' academic and social success, and improve the school climate (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Key features of SWPBIS include (a) the establishment of clearly defined and consistent school-wide expectations, (b) teaching and reviewing expectations with students, (c) acknowledging students for engaging in appropriate behavior, (d) providing clear and consistent consequences for inappropriate behavior, and (e) using data to drive decision

making regarding students' need for support (C. M. Nelson et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Taken together, these elements enable students, even those with behavioral difficulties, to thrive at school and at home (Wilder & King-Peery, 2011). The major emphasis of SWPBIS is prevention.

SWPBIS is a school-wide initiative that involves the application of increasingly intense tiers of behavioral support based on students' needs. At Tier 1, school leaders identify three to five positively-worded behavioral expectations that are taught, modelled, practiced, reinforced, and prompted consistently across the school with all students. By Tier 2, students who are at-risk or experiencing behavioral concerns are provided with supplemental interventions (e.g., counseling and mentoring) and their progress is monitored. Finally, during Tier 3, students who are exhibiting significant behavioral concerns and those who have not sufficiently responded to Tier 1 and Tier 2 services are provided with intensive supports, often including a functional behavior assessment and individualized behavior intervention plan (Noltemeyer et al., 2018).

As of 2018, approximately 26,000 schools in 49 states had implemented SWPBIS (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). In fact, a recent research synthesis by Noltemeyer et al. (2018) showed most studies that performed significance testing on the impact of SWPBIS implementation on office discipline referrals and suspensions revealed significantly positive effects, whereas most studies that performed significance testing on achievement measures found insignificant or mixed results. Noltemeyer et al. (2019) synthesized the findings from 55 cases to better understand the (a) general quantity, quality, and types of SWPBIS research being conducted; and (b) overall magnitude of these relationships across studies. Most cases were single descriptive studies, included PBIS implementation

data, and studied diverse elementary or multi-grade populations within the United States. Of the cases that performed statistical analyses, the majority reported predominantly positive findings, and these findings were notably more positive for behavioral outcomes than for academic outcomes. The use of SWPBIS as a means for reducing office discipline referrals and school suspensions holds promise (Sanon, 2017). However, according to Hanover Research (2013), "SWPBIS is not designed specifically to mitigate the racial disparity in school discipline and, indeed, does not address race overtly. Instead, SWPBIS is designed to create equitable discipline practices based on a system of positive reinforcement" (p. 7). To address potential cultural and linguistic barriers, T. Banks and Obiakor (2015) proposed the infusion of culturally responsive practices throughout the implementation of SWPBIS.

Culturally responsive practices involve using the cultural knowledge, life experiences, and learning styles of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students to make learning more relevant and effective for them (T. Banks & Obiakor, 2015). By building upon the knowledge and strengths students bring with them from their homes and communities, culturally responsive practice validates who they are and sets high expectations for behavior and learning. It comprehensively creates an environment in which diversity is affirmed and establishes a cultural lens for determining normative behavior and learning expectations (Gay, 2002). Combining PBIS with cultural and linguistic variables will help to enhance the positive behavior of CLD students (T. Banks & Obiakor, 2015). CRPBIS establishes an inclusive school culture with a shared vision of values, beliefs, and behavior expectations. Creating a school culture that ensures students who are not from the dominant culture do not experience microaggressions like

"unintentional slights, which devalue their backgrounds and diminish school connectedness" (Leverson et al., 2016, p. 2) is beneficial to students from diverse backgrounds. Leverson et al. (2016) outlined five core components of CRPBIS: (a) identity (being aware of how identity influences classroom interactions), (b) voice (providing meaningful opportunities for parent and community engagement in PBIS), (c) a supportive environment (staff understand the school mission and work as a team to help each other accomplish it), (d) situational appropriateness (modifying one's behavior when settings or contexts change), and (e) data for equity (trends in data regarding issues of equity or culture must be discussed).

McGoey et al. (2016) illustrated the incorporation of the five core components of CRPBIS in a school-wide project designed to strengthen social-emotional supports and clarify discipline procedures in an urban Jewish community day school. In recognizing and valuing the cultural identity of the students from across the religious spectrum, the K-8 elementary school staff infused CRPBIS with key elements of the Jewish culture by adapting some of the terminology and language used in the CRPBIS framework to create a more supportive environment. Data from the program's implementation indicated an overall increasing trend in the number of rewards given to students for appropriate school behavior in the first 3 years of implementation with decreases in Year 4 and 5 as staff and students internalized the behavioral expectations (McGoey et al., 2016). Following a similar pattern, discipline referrals increased from Years 1 to 3 as teachers and administrators employed discipline procedures and recording methods more consistently; however, discipline referrals decreased in Year 4 and Year 5. Across the 5 years, the fewest number of discipline referrals were reported in Year 5 (McGoey et al., 2016).

Fetterman et al. (2020) performed a case study that described the development and implementation of a CRPBIS program in a newly formed, urban, Spanish-language magnet elementary school. Data from the first year of the CRPBIS Spanish-language school program indicated increases in implementation fidelity as well as equitable student knowledge of behavioral expectations across both native Spanish speakers and native English speakers when culturally responsive materials and procedures were used to teach and reinforce behavior expectations (Fetterman et al., 2020). Teachers also reported positive perceptions of the program's goals, procedures, and outcomes.

Inferences for the Forthcoming Study

Through this review of the literature, a variety of gaps were identified that demonstrated a need for further research. The review showed APs are overshadowed in the school discipline discourse as most research narrowly focuses on teachers, principals, and law enforcement personnel (Anyon et al., 2018; Irby, 2014). The majority of the sources in this review studied the intents and practices of school administrators, teachers, staff, and educators in general or principals in particular, but APs have been omitted from discourses on disciplinary policies although they are the main adjudicators of these practices. However, these sources historicize the politics and biases inherent in disciplinary policies like zero tolerance and other modes of exclusionary discipline that APs implement. They explained how these practices have lifelong negative effects on marginalized populations like Black and LatinX youth, SWD, and children from low SES communities. They discussed the inconsistency and increasing severity of these policies' implementation and detailed the overburdened social and political environment.

APs play a unique and influential role in shifting from zero tolerance policies toward a more equitable public school environment. Boske and Benavente-McEnery (2012) highlighted that examining APs as leaders in social justice has the potential to drive meaningful change (p. 288). According to DeMatthews et al. (2017), APs who can recognize racial inequities and act in response are often labeled SJLs. Research is needed to understand how APs make sense of the discipline process within their school and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students and close the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices. The following chapter describes the methodology used to seek answers to the research questions using qualitative methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

In this chapter, I describe the methodology as well as the specific and intentional choices made in the design of the current study. This study provides an important contribution to the body of school leadership literature through its focus on the AP, the school administrator most responsible for student discipline (K. J. Banks, 2018; Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012; Williams et al., 2023). The focus within this basic interpretive study was to understand the lived experiences of APs in urban Title I K-12 public schools across the nation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that the basic interpretive method focuses on inquiry and the use of a deliberate study to seek to understand a phenomenon. The basic interpretive method is the most "common form" of qualitative research in education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23), and the primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret meaning. This approach provided me as the researcher an opportunity to understand how APs construct meaning through the sensemaking process when making disciplinary decisions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Through this research, I endeavored to construct an understanding of how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students by closing the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices. Additionally, I explored and conceptualized the leadership actions of APs toward equity within the theoretical framework of sensemaking theory, social justice theory, and transformative leadership theory. I collected data via semi-structured interviews with 20 APs of urban Title I K-12 public schools who met the study's criteria.

I then used coding to analyze the data (Saldaña, 2015). I designed my qualitative study to address the following research questions with subquestions:

- **RQ1:** How do APs develop a social justice identity?
- **RQ2:** How do APs who self-identified as social justice leaders make sense of and work toward closing the racial discipline gap, if at all?
    a. What actions and/or strategies, if any, do APs use to close the racial discipline gap and systemic barriers within school discipline?
- **RQ3:** How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools?
    a. What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process?

In this chapter, I describe the epistemological and theoretical perspectives chosen for the study and provide an in-depth description of the data collection and analysis methods. I include a comprehensive description of the trustworthiness techniques I used to increase the study's credibility, which is inclusive of ethical considerations.

Epistemology and Theoretical Frameworks

Epistemology is the way of communicating what we know and have experienced (Crotty, 1998). Social constructivism is rooted in the belief that knowledge is constructed through human interactions and that multiple methods, as opposed to one single method, help researchers understand knowledge (Yin, 2015). Constructivist researchers often address the processes of interaction among individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural setting of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This paradigm uses an inductive

approach, where the information gathered is analyzed to determine any common themes that may arise, in this case from the participants' interpretation of sensemaking when making disciplinary decisions.

Crotty (1998) described a theoretical perspective as "a context for the process" (p. 3). After a thorough review of several theories, I used a combination of the sensemaking theory, social justice leadership theory, and transformative leadership theory. Sensemaking theory provided a lens to look at the sensemaking process of APs while making disciplinary decisions. Social justice leadership offered a comprehensive framework through which to conceptualize how APs identify and eradicate unjust social practices and conditions in addition to the processes they used when replacing these practices with more equitable alternatives. Last, transformative leadership theory provided context to data associated with APs' practices and actions toward equity.

Methodology

I incorporated the use of a basic qualitative interpretive design to inform the research questions and analysis. This approach provided me an opportunity to gain an understanding of APs' use of sensemaking as they addressed the inequities that exist within their schools by dismantling exclusionary practices. This basic interpretive study involves inquiry and the intentional use of research to gain an understanding of phenomena (Stake, 2010). Merriam (2002) indicated qualitative researchers make meaning of what people have constructed about their experiences and asserted that the product of qualitative inquiry is rich as the researcher attempts to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. Yin (2015) stated the researcher serves as the primary research instrument because external instruments cannot measure

some important real-world phenomena. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), basic interpretive qualitative research "recognizes the self-reflective nature of qualitative research and emphasizes the role of the researcher as an interpreter of data and an individual who represents information" (p. 248). Moreover, a basic interpretive research places value on language and discourse and does not begin with a predetermined notion (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Rather, the design components are interconnected and interact among different concepts. Therefore, researchers must continually predetermine how the design is progressing and how it is influenced by the context of the process.

In-Depth Interviews

At the core of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2019). Interviewing as a process by which the researcher and participant engage in a conversation is framed by the purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), it is a method of data collection that is especially helpful when a researcher cannot directly observe a phenomenon or when they seek to describe how others interpret a phenomenon. There are levels of structure to interviewing, but the use of less structure allows participants to respond more uniquely yet provides enough structure to guide the conversation to elicit information around the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019).

As the main data collection tool, I conducted one 60- to 90-minute individual in-depth semi-structured interview with each participant. I developed a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix A and B) that I used to gather information from the participants relevant to the topic to give voice to and objectively create meaning

from their experiences. Through the interviews, I expected to be able to identify the steps taken by APs as they go through the disciplinary process.

I conducted the interviews through an online video conferencing platform at a time of the participants' choosing. I recorded the interviews through the video conferencing application and took notes throughout the interviews to document any nonverbal observations, emotional responses, significant quotes, or areas for follow up. I asked follow-up questions for clarification as needed. There was only one round of interviews conducted along with the distribution of a pre-demographic survey (see Appendix C). A pre-demographic survey was given to the participants prior to the interview to gather demographic and other information to be used during the interview process (Moore & Ginsburg, 2017).

After each participant interview, I wrote field notes with the intent of making connections to both the theoretical framework and the purpose of the study and of providing a summary of thoughts or actionable items for follow up. I also engaged in a document review to help further understand how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students by closing the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline practices. Interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service. A recheck of the transcriptions against the actual recordings ensured accuracy.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to gather a sample of APs in urban Title I K-12 public schools. Purposeful sampling assumes the investigator aims to discover, understand, and gain insight, necessitating the selection of a sample from which substantial learning can

occur (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The priority in sample selection was identifying cases that were information-rich, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Purposeful sampling, specifically employing the snowball method as described by Seidman (2019), was used. Snowball sampling, the most common form of purposeful sampling, involves identifying a few key participants who meet the predetermined study criteria and then asking those early participants to recommend additional potential participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition to snowball sampling and word-of-mouth recommendations, I attended a national conference for Black educators, which significantly aided my recruitment efforts by allowing direct networking and the identification of potential participants who fit the study's criteria.

Initial recruitment efforts to solicit nationwide participants were conducted by engaging professional organizations of which APs are members through flyers, emails, and social media platforms. Participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

- Current, full-time employment as an AP.
- At least 1 year of administrative experience at their current school site.
- Employment as an AP in an urban Title I K-12 public school.
- Responsibility for making disciplinary decisions involving students from marginalized backgrounds, consistent with the study's focus.
- Self-identification as a SJL.

These criteria were carefully designed to identify APs capable of providing detailed reflections and comprehensive perspectives on the discipline process. Ultimately, a

sample size of 20 participants was reached, aligning with Crotty's (1998) recommendation for achieving saturation in qualitative studies.

Data Management

The most important part of data analysis and management is to be true to the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Conducting qualitative research is about putting oneself in another person's shoes and seeing the world from that person's perspective. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), it is the voices of the participants that the researcher is trying to hear so they can be interpreted and reported on for others to read and learn from.

To maintain confidentiality, I took steps to ensure the identities of participants were not recognizable (Seidman, 2019) both from the interview and the document analysis. I removed all identifying information from the recordings prior to releasing them to an outside source for transcription. The online recordings of participant interviews were password protected, with a backup kept in a secure location, in addition to any other forms with participant information, for the duration of the study. All participants were identified by pseudonyms throughout the analysis. If any participants changed their minds about participating after the interview was completed, the circumstances would have been documented on an audit trail and their interview would not have been used as data. I also used an audit trail throughout the study to maintain transparency by describing how the data were collected and analyzed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maxwell, 2013).

Data Analysis: Coding Process Aligned to Dissertation Themes

The coding process for this study was methodically structured into three distinct stages, progressing from capturing participants' authentic expressions (in vivo coding), to forming interconnected conceptual categories (axial coding), and culminating in the development of comprehensive thematic narratives (selective coding). This iterative approach ensured the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while systematically connecting those experiences to the broader conceptual framework of the study.

Stage 1: In Vivo Coding

In the initial phase, interview transcripts were coded line by line using in vivo coding to capture APs' direct language, expressions, and reflections. This technique honored participants' voices and preserved the authenticity of their experiences, ensuring the emergent themes remained closely tied to the participants' worldviews.

For example, AP Jade Chambers described early disparities she observed during childhood: "I grew up on a small island . . . I saw classmates who lacked basic needs. These early disparities shaped my commitment to equity." Through this first level of coding, meaningful phrases were systematically identified to reflect participants' understandings of equity, leadership, and discipline.

Stage 2: Axial Coding

During the second stage, in vivo codes were organized into broader, cohesive categories through axial coding. This process involved identifying patterns, similarities, and relationships among the initial codes, clustering them into higher-level conceptual groups that illuminated common experiences across participants.

For example, experiences like those of Jade Chambers and Barclay Bond, who described the development of critical consciousness through diverse lived experiences, were clustered into the category of "Personal and Observed Experiences Shaping Social Justice Identity." Insights from APs such as Melinda Plaza and Israel Little regarding inequitable resource distribution and biases in special education placement were grouped into the category "Structural Inequities." Axial coding enabled the construction of a conceptual bridge between participants' statements and the broader themes that would later be synthesized.

Stage 3: Selective Coding

In the final stage, selective coding, the major categories developed through axial coding were integrated into overarching thematic narratives that directly addressed the study's research questions. This stage emphasized a coherent synthesis of participant perspectives, culminating in themes that both reflected the data and aligned with the study's conceptual framework. Some examples of developed themes are as follows:

- Development of social justice identity through personal and professional experiences. Barclay Bond reflected: "Being in diverse environments reshaped my understanding of education and my role in promoting fairness."
- Structural inequities contributing to the racial discipline gap. Israel Little emphasized systemic disparities: "Disparities in resources and special education designations show stark contrasts between affluent and lower-income communities."
- Implicit bias impacting disciplinary decisions. Jessica Meyer discussed the influence of biases on disciplinary outcomes: "Misconceptions that Black girls

mature faster or Black boys are inherently misfits profoundly affect disciplinary actions."

- Deficiency in cultural competence among educators. Clara Romero highlighted cultural misunderstandings in disciplinary interpretations: "Teachers often misinterpret students' culturally specific expressions, leading to unnecessary discipline."

Through the use of NVivo software, this three-tiered coding approach resulted in the identification of 20 major nodes and 356 subcategories, richly capturing the complexity and nuance of APs' lived and professional experiences as they worked to address racial discipline disparities. To further enhance transparency and illustrate the coding process, an excerpt of the codebook used for this study is provided in Appendix D. The codebook includes representative examples of codes, categories, and thematic linkages, demonstrating how raw data were systematically organized and interpreted throughout the analysis. This rigorous and systematic coding methodology provided a strong foundation for the interpretation of findings, ensuring that participants' authentic voices remained central to the analysis of equity-centered leadership practices.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that validity is not a dynamic concept and should not be used to confirm the fitness of any constructivist approach. Instead, they suggested the concepts of trustworthiness, authenticity, and quality add value to a research study. Building trustworthiness is viewed as more of an "attitude" than a specific procedure used to build credibility (Yin, 2015, p. 86). Trustworthiness or the truth-value of qualitative research and transparency of the conduct of the study are crucial to the

usefulness and integrity of the findings (Cope, 2014). To develop trustworthiness in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) initially presented five criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity. For the purposes of this study, I used the following criteria as outlined by Cope (2014) to ensure trustworthiness.

1. Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participants' views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher.
2. Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions.
3. Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints.
4. Transferability refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups.
5. Authenticity refers to the ability and extent to which the researcher expresses the feelings and emotions of the participant's experiences in a faithful manner. (p. 89)

Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to reliability as consistency and dependability and validity as credibility when referring to trustworthiness in qualitative research. Researchers should integrate several validity procedures into a study to strengthen trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Triangulation of data methods is a strategy used to increase the validity of a study; however, as this study involved only semi-structured interviews as the data source, Maxwell (2013) suggested triangulation of trustworthiness techniques to address validity threats.

Techniques for establishing trustworthiness help ensure the accuracy and consistency of data analysis and interpretation in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In interview-based studies, strategies such as member checking, peer

debriefing, and rich, thick descriptions enhance the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2015). Member checking involves providing participants with the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy at a later stage in the study or to redact any information they prefer not to include (Yin, 2015).

After completing the interview report, I shared the transcripts with participants to verify the accuracy of their statements. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified member checking as a critical process for strengthening the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative research. Additionally, I gave the participants the opportunity to revise or redact any part of their responses, and I communicated any changes made before finalizing the submission.

Peer debriefing was another strategy I employed to ensure trustworthiness. Peer debriefing is the process of having a colleague look at the information gathered to determine whether the data are represented accurately. This strategy involves an interpretation by someone beyond the researcher who adds credibility to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I chose a colleague to review the methodology, design, methods, and analysis of data, and then asked them to provide feedback to enhance the accuracy of the study and methods. The use of rich, thick data was accomplished by gathering verbatim quotes from the interviews and incorporating them in both the data analysis and findings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated the use of rich, thick data allows for transferability. Data collection and description include a great deal of depth. During the interviews, I collected verbatim transcripts via audio recording.

For this study, I ensured consistency through the use of an audit trail that included information on each interview process, how the interview was conducted, the process of

coding, and the rationale for each code that was developed throughout the coding process (Yin, 2015). The audit trail is a descriptive log of a study and findings that can include when and how the data were collected, examples of the coding process, and a rationale for the codes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Last, to minimize researcher bias in this study, I kept a reflective journal. According to Ary et al. (2006), reflexivity, demonstrated through the use of a reflective journal, helps a researcher to recognize their own biases. Reflexivity involves examining how one's subjectivity influences the research (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The use of these multiple approaches enhanced my ability to assess the accuracy of the findings as well as convince readers of the trustworthiness of this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, I submitted my application to the George Washington University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Given that the participants in this study were human participants, I needed to submit my research to assess for any possible ethical and safety concerns. As such, I submitted my study protocol with a detailed outline of the features of my study and related concerns over protecting participants. As part of the IRB process, I submitted information related to obtaining voluntary informed consent; assessing the harms, risks, and benefits of the research study; selecting equitable groups; and ensuring confidentiality regarding participants' identities.

Given the sensitivity of the study, participants may have disclosed aspects of their lives that may have caused discomfort and possibly emotional distress, and, as such, informed consent was required. Participants had the right to be protected against any vulnerability during the interview process and subsequent data analysis (Kelman, 1977).

Informed consent is a way of minimizing the risks to participants. I provided the participants the information required to meaningfully gauge whether or not they wanted to proceed. The informed consent included seven out of the eight major components as outlined by Seidman (2019): (a) "an invitation to participate in what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom" (p. 64); (b) risks; (c) rights; (d) possible benefits; (e) confidentiality of data; (f) information on the process of dissemination; and (g) contact information and copies of the form (see Appendix E).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the methodological, epistemological, and theoretical perspectives chosen for this study and provided an in-depth description of the data collection and analysis methods. Interviews were the sole means for data collection, and I presented a comprehensive description of the trustworthiness techniques I used to increase the study's credibility, concluding with ethical considerations. At the forefront of this study was the opportunity for the APs' voices to be heard and to better understand how APs make sense of their disciplinary decisions.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students by closing the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline practices. There is an overabundance of research available on the general topic of exclusionary discipline, yet there is a lack of empirical literature solely centered on APs and their actions to close the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline practices. The focus in this basic qualitative interpretive study was on the experiences of APs in Title I urban K-12 public schools across the United States with the racial discipline gap within exclusionary practices.

I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with APs in 17 different school districts throughout the United States. In addition to completing interviews, I engaged in a document review to help further understand how APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools and the actions they employ to promote the needs of all students by closing the racial discipline gap within exclusionary discipline practices. The study's major findings and themes were guided by three primary research questions, along with subquestions:

- **RQ1:** How do APs develop a social justice identity?
- **RQ2:** How do APs who self-identified as social justice leaders make sense of and work toward closing the racial discipline gap, if at all?
    a. What actions and/or strategies, if any, do APs use to close the racial discipline gap and systemic barriers within school discipline?

- **RQ3:** How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools?
    a. What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process?

These research questions served as the foundation for exploring the multifaceted perspectives and experiences of APs in addressing the racial discipline gap within their educational contexts.

In this chapter, I introduce the study's participants and provide a brief overview of their backgrounds. I then summarize the findings and themes that emerged from the interviews and document reviews, organizing the findings according to thematic relevance. The major findings included the development of APs' social justice identities; their perspectives on factors contributing to the racial discipline gap; teachers acting as barriers to closing this gap; the actions and strategies APs used to address the racial discipline gap; considerations made when processing discipline and behavioral referrals; and other factors influencing the discipline process. Each section discusses the thematic relevance to the study's purpose, framework, and research questions.

Description of the Sample

The sample for this study was 20 APs from 17 urban Title I public schools across the United States, representing both elementary and secondary levels. Participants provided their demographic information, including age, race, ethnicity, and gender. The sample consisted of 12 women and eight men, with years served in the AP role ranging from 2 to 15 years. Participants' overall experience in the field of education ranged from 9 to 28 years.

In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, five participants identified as White, 14 as Black or African American, and one as Hispanic. Geographically, participants hailed from various regions of the United States, with 13 from the Southeast, four from the Northeast, two from the Southwest, and one from the Midwest. Additionally, seven APs were at the high school level, four at the middle school level, four at the elementary level, and three at K-8 schools. Two APs worked in alternative schools, one at the middle school level and the other at the high school level.

Prior to the study, participants completed a pre-demographic survey (see Appendix C) in which they were asked to self-assess their comfort level in social justice leadership according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Participants identified themselves as Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent, Proficient, or Expert based on their experience and confidence in this area. Of the 20 participants, three identified as Experts, seven as Proficient, six as Competent, two as Advanced Beginners, and two as Novices. Their self-assessments are displayed in Table 1.

To ensure confidentiality while maintaining a sense of personal connection for readers, I assigned pseudonyms to each participant for their name, school, and district, as recommended by Yin (2015). Throughout the dissertation, all participants are referred to by the pseudonyms listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	SJL self-assessment	Race/Ethnicity	Years in role	Years in education	Degree level	School level	School location
Morris Polk	Male	Expert	Black	4	10	EdD	Elementary	Northeast
Israel Little	Male	Expert	Black	1	10	EdD	High school	Northeast
Kate Dart	Female	Expert	Black	7	25	Master's	High school	Southeast
Craig Tetter	Male	Competent	Black	6	17	Master's	High school	Southeast
Jackson Glisson	Male	Proficient	Black	5	10	Master's	K-8	Southeast
Manfred Perkins	Male	Novice	Black	15	23	Master's	High school	Southwest
Viola Rowse	Female	Proficient	Black	3	12	Master's	High school	Southeast
Kay Holmes	Female	Proficient	White	7	28	Master's	Alternative high school	Southeast

Pseudonym	Gender	SJL self-assessment	Race/Ethnicity	Years in role	Years in education	Degree level	School level	School location
Andrea Blake	Female	Advanced Beginner	White	2	12	Master's	K-8	Southwest
Barclay Bond	Male	Proficient	White	7	26	Master's	High school	Southeast
Melinda Plaza	Female	Competent	Hispanic	4	13	Master's	High school	Southeast
Bud Baker	Male	Competent	White	6	20	Master's	Alternative middle school	Northeast
Maia Parkinson	Female	Proficient	Black	2.5	20	Master's	Middle school	Southeast
Jake Tuttle	Male	Competent	Black	3	9	Master's	Middle school	Southeast
Jessica Meyer	Female	Proficient	Black	3	25	EdD	Elementary	Northeast
Jade Chambers	Female	Expert	Black	2	20	Master's	K-8	Southeast
Lark Boothe	Female	Competent	White	6	18	Master's	Elementary	Southeast

Pseudonym	Gender	SJL self-assessment	Race/Ethnicity	Years in role	Years in education	Degree level	School level	School location
Clara Romero	Female	Proficient	Black	3	17	Master's	Elementary	Southeast
Myrtle Hill	Female	Competent	Black	3	12	Master's	Middle school	Southeast
Iris Kale	Female	Advanced Beginner	Black	2	23	Master's	Middle school	Midwest

The following section provides detailed participant summaries highlighting how the APs in the study aligned with various stages of the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Honken, 2013) in relation to SJL. Each participant's self-assessed proficiency level, ranging from Novice to Expert, is illustrated through narrative descriptions based on their interview data, demographic background, and reflections on leadership practices. These summaries contextualize the APs' leadership journeys, equity driven actions, and disciplinary decision-making approaches, offering insight into how their social justice identities informed their work to close the racial discipline gap within their schools. The following narratives are organized according to each participant's self-identified level of expertise.

Morris Polk

Based on the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013), Morris Polk self-identified as an Expert in SJL. According to this model, an expert is characterized by deep intuitive understanding, the ability to navigate complex situations effortlessly, and decisive action guided by internalized knowledge rather than explicit rules or procedures. Mr. Polk's interview and demographic data substantiate his expert status. With a doctorate degree and 10 years of experience in education, including four as an AP at a Title I elementary school in the Northeast, Mr. Polk consistently demonstrated profound proficiency in implementing equity-driven strategies. He described his approach clearly: "A social justice leader, I define it as someone with the moral courage to disrupt and dismantle systems and structures that do not benefit marginalized subgroups or communities." Furthermore, Mr. Polk emphasized decisive, intuitive actions rooted in social justice principles, stating, "People can observe and know what to do, but the key is

actually putting yourself out there and making the necessary changes to be a more supportive leader." His disciplined approach to restorative practices, refusal to rely on punitive measures, and unwavering commitment to confronting implicit biases among teachers underscore his expert-level competence as defined by the Dreyfus model. Additionally, Mr. Polk's reflective practices, such as initiating targeted equity-focused PD and leading book studies on culturally responsive teaching, exemplify his adeptness at internalizing social justice principles to drive systemic change.

Israel Little

Israel Little self-identified confidently as an expert SJL, reflecting the highest stage of proficiency described by the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013), characterized by deep intuitive judgment, holistic perception, and a profound ability to navigate complex issues effortlessly. Mr. Little holds an EdD and possesses 10 years of educational experience, including significant roles as a climate manager and AP within challenging alternative education settings in Philadelphia. He explicitly embraces his identity as a disruptor, passionately stating,

> I'm a disruptor because when I walk into these spaces and I see these colonizers or oppressors looking to create more oppression of low socioeconomic Black and Brown babies, somebody's got to be willing to be that Nat Turner type.

His actions and leadership decisions illustrate his intuitive understanding and decisive disruption of systemic inequities, evident through his implementation of restorative practices and refusal to rely on exclusionary discipline. He articulated, "We're not looking to discipline or punish; we're looking for people to accept accountability and restore the harm done to that community," highlighting his adeptness in addressing the root causes of disciplinary disparities rather than merely symptoms. Mr. Little's nuanced appreciation of the complexities facing marginalized communities, such as gang-related

conflicts and socioeconomic trauma, and his ability to tailor disciplinary responses to address both individual needs and systemic injustices underscore his expert-level capacity for deeply internalized social justice leadership.

Kate Dart

Kate Dart confidently rated herself as an Expert SJL as described in the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). According to the Dreyfus model, experts exhibit intuitive understanding, profound insight, and the ability to navigate complex, nuanced situations effortlessly. Ms. Dart, with a master's degree and an extensive 25 years of educational experience including 9 years specifically in leadership as Dean of Students and AP, demonstrates expert level proficiency through her deep internalized knowledge and decisive actions toward equity and social justice in schools. She described her approach by explicitly articulating a moral and professional commitment, stating clearly, "Being a social justice leader means being a truth teller and not sugarcoating anything, and being aware of what is happening outside in the politics, in the community that's impacting our students." Ms. Dart further illustrated her expert level insight by critically analyzing school discipline policies through an equity lens, stating, "I felt that at the beginning of the year, we were telling kids to take off their hoods, and who were we impacting? Black and Brown boys. We were creating a negative environment for our students." Her intuitive leadership is evident in how she leverages autonomy to intentionally shape discipline practices to mitigate harm to marginalized students, underscoring her capacity for nuanced understanding and proactive decision making characteristic of an expert according to the Dreyfus model.

Craig Tetter

Craig Tetter rated himself as a Competent SJL, consistent with the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013), which describes competence as characterized by analytical thinking, planning, and deliberate action informed by considerable experience but still relying primarily on conscious strategies rather than intuitive judgments. Mr. Tetter, who holds a master's degree and has 15 years in education, including 7 years as an AP, clearly demonstrates competence through his thoughtful and structured approach to disciplinary decisions and equity leadership. He emphasizes using data-driven discussions and explicit reflective practices to address racial disparities, stating, "Illuminating the data, whether academic or disciplinary, is critical to engaging teachers in social justice conversations." His professional practice reflects a conscious effort to consider equity consistently: "I address disciplinary infractions through an equity lens, ensuring my actions are equitable, consistent, and progressive." Mr. Tetter also actively engages teachers in PD on cultural proficiency and leads equity dialogues, reflecting a deliberate approach characteristic of competence-level leaders. Additionally, his reflective acknowledgment, "I do reflect often on if I am being biased towards one group more than the other," underscores his commitment to carefully analyzing his practice to mitigate implicit bias, aligning well with the competent stage described by the Dreyfus model.

Jackson Glisson

Jackson Glisson rated himself as a Competent SJL, aligning closely with the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013), which defines competence by the ability to systematically manage multiple factors in decision-making and demonstrate reflective, planned action. Mr. Glisson, an AP with 17 years in education and 5 in administration,

consistently demonstrated deliberate, analytical decision making during disciplinary processes, emphasizing reflection, transparency, and equitable treatment for all students. His practice centers around restorative approaches and understanding the context behind behaviors, stating, “It’s important to take a step back and don’t put emotion into the actual action, and instead look at why the student did what they did.” Mr. Glisson also highlighted his reflective approach to equity, saying, “You have to audit yourself, looking at the data to ensure consistent treatment.” Additionally, his detailed discussions of engaging families, supporting teachers in culturally responsive practices, and proactively addressing systemic barriers, such as implicit biases through ongoing PD, underscore his thoughtful and structured approach can be considered hallmarks of a competent-level leader in social justice and educational leadership.

Manfred Perkins

Manfred Perkins rated himself as a Novice SJL, consistent with the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013) definition, indicating reliance on rules, policies, and clear guidelines rather than nuanced judgment regarding social justice issues. Mr. Perkins, an African American male AP with 23 years in education and 15 years in administration, emphasizes policy adherence, fairness, and consistency in disciplinary decision-making. His leadership philosophy prioritizes supporting teachers and students: “I tell teachers, ‘I need you to be your best . . . so that our kids can be successful.’” He is guided by the belief that all students deserve equal treatment and opportunities, noting explicitly, “I just treat all our kids the same.” Mr. Perkins expressed skepticism about the racial discipline gap existing on his campus due to the predominantly African American student population but recognized it could occur district-wide.

Mr. Perkins described his discipline practices as heavily structured around district policies, explaining, “I always go to the code of conduct first,” and emphasizing fairness in discipline. He noted socioeconomic status and challenging home environments as major factors influencing student behavior: “It’s the parents, it’s the upbringing . . . society, really.” Though Mr. Perkins shows awareness of broader societal issues influencing student behavior, he consistently returns to personal responsibility, parenting, and policy adherence as primary determinants of student discipline outcomes. Reflecting novice characteristics, Mr. Perkins avoids deep engagement with racial equity frameworks or systemic critique, focusing instead on individual student behaviors and institutional guidelines. He expressed discomfort with exclusionary discipline decisions, saying, “I definitely get no joy out of putting a kid out of school,” but remains firmly within policy boundaries when administering discipline. Overall, Mr. Perkins operates from a structured, compliance-oriented standpoint, aligning closely with novice-level leadership according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013).

Viola Rowse

Viola Rowse, a Black female high school administrator, self-identified as Proficient in social justice leadership according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Throughout her interview, Ms. Rowse demonstrated advanced understanding and reflective practices, indicative of her proficiency level. She articulated clear insights into the complexities of discipline and equity, stating, “I don’t believe in everybody should just be suspended right away. I do believe in interventions. I do believe in speaking *with* a student, not speaking *at* a student.” Ms. Rowse reflected deeply on her previous experiences, recognizing practices that contributed negatively to the racial

discipline gap: “We did not handle discipline properly or effectively for our African American children. We failed them.” These reflections and her current advocacy highlight her ability to perceive situational nuances and adapt her strategies, which is characteristic of a proficient leader according to the Dreyfus model.

Kay Holmes

Kay Holmes, a White AP with 7 years in the role, self-identified as Proficient in social justice leadership on the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Throughout her interview, Ms. Holmes expressed a sophisticated, reflective understanding of disciplinary practices and equity. She explicitly aligns herself with the principles of restorative justice, stating, “Student discipline really needs to be less about discipline and more about restorative justice and development of executive functioning skills which are typically at the root of many behavior issues.” Ms. Holmes also demonstrated her ability to reflect critically on social justice practices and continually improve, acknowledging, “I will forever be a student of social justice and equity because there is always something more to learn.” This ongoing commitment to reflection, coupled with her proactive, nuanced approach to discipline and equity, aligns well with the characteristics of a proficient SJL according to the Dreyfus model.

Andrea Blake

Andrea Blake, a White female AP in her second year at a K–8 school, self-identifies at the Advanced Beginner level in social justice leadership according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Blake emphasizes fairness, consistency, and relationship building as foundational to her disciplinary approach. She stated, “I make sure every child has the chance for their voice to be heard,” underscoring her

awareness and intentionality regarding equity. However, Ms. Blake acknowledges limited formal exposure and personal experience with racial disparities, indicating, “I know the racial discipline gap exists because I read about it, but I haven’t had firsthand experience with it.” Though she demonstrates a strong commitment to individual student advocacy and fairness, hallmarks of an Advanced Beginner, her reflection reveals developing recognition and understanding of broader systemic racial justice issues, aligning well with her identified proficiency level.

Barclay Bond

Barclay Bond, a White male AP with 39 years in education and 7 years in his current role at a high school in the Southeast, demonstrates characteristics of a Proficient-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). He emphasizes dignity, equity, and individual accountability as central to his educational values and discipline philosophy. Mr. Bond acknowledges the presence of a clear racial discipline gap on his campus, primarily involving Latinx and Black students, which he attributes to systemic educational inequities, implicit biases, and the inability of schools to fully adapt to students’ diverse needs. Mr. Bond actively reflects on his disciplinary practices and seeks collaborative decision making involving students, parents, and staff to ensure fairness and consistency.

He prioritizes a reflective, individualized approach to student discipline, highlighting relationship-building, open-mindedness, and context-sensitive decisions. Mr. Bond is deeply reflective about the impact of his decisions, stating, “I always want to rebuild those relationships . . .be on the side of grace and forgiveness so that we can move forward.” He also demonstrates a thoughtful awareness of broader social

implications, expressing his commitment to confronting inequity directly: “We consistently reinforce [the racial discipline gap] by not allowing change to occur . . .We just keep it going because it serves us as opposed to serving others.” Mr. Bond identifies personal biases and societal attitudes as barriers he continually works to address, actively challenging the traditional constructs of discipline through listening, dialogue, and systemic reflection.

Melinda Plaza

Melinda Plaza, a Hispanic female AP with 4 years of experience at her current school, demonstrates characteristics of an Advanced level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Plaza clearly connects her leadership values and actions to her lived experiences growing up in a low socioeconomic neighborhood, which significantly shaped her educational philosophy. She emphasizes equity and cultural competence as foundational to her leadership practice, stating explicitly, “I definitely name it, but then I also try to disrupt it,” underscoring her active role in combating systemic bias within her school. Further, she intentionally addresses unconscious bias, exemplified by her reflection on staff interactions: “I purposely sat on a different side . . .but when all of the white males came in, they all sat together . . . just naming those little things.” These statements reflect her capacity to recognize systemic issues and proactively intervene, consistent with the competencies of an Advanced-level leader in social justice.

Bud Baker

Bud Baker, a White male AP with approximately 20 years of educational experience, demonstrates characteristics of an Expert-level SJL according to the Dreyfus

Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Transitioning from a career in insurance, Mr. Baker's leadership values were significantly shaped by influential mentors and personal experiences, emphasizing empathy, integrity, and student-focused decision-making. He dedicates roughly 65% of his day to preventative and restorative discipline, stressing individualized approaches to student trauma and disabilities. Mr. Baker defines social justice leadership through self-awareness, open dialogue, and equity, notably informed by implicit bias training at Bank Street. His reflective practice, ability to handle complex disciplinary scenarios, and recognition of systemic inequities align strongly with the competencies of an Expert-level leader. For example, he emphasized, "to champion social justice, you have to understand yourself and understand what biases you come with," underscoring his reflective practice. Additionally, he stated, "being a champion is understanding that you may not know it," highlighting his openness to continuous learning and dialogue on issues of equity.

Maia Parkinson

Maia Parkinson, an African American female AP with 21 years of experience, demonstrates characteristics consistent with a Competent-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Parkinson's approach to discipline is heavily guided by the district's Behavioral Learning Guide (BLG), emphasizing consistency, fairness, and restorative practices. She actively recognizes disparities, noting, "the racial discipline gap does exist," and highlights the role of cultural disconnects and implicit biases among teachers as barriers to equitable discipline. Despite not explicitly defining herself as an SJL, Ms. Parkinson's moral compass deeply influences her professional practice. She asserts, "I can't look at myself and feel good

about what I do unless I've done something right," underscoring her commitment to fairness and ethical considerations. Further, she reflects, "Why can't everyone do the same thing for all the kids, regardless of what school they're at, regardless of their gender or race," illustrating her growing capacity to navigate and address systemic inequities, aligning her closely with Competent-level social justice leadership competencies.

Jake Tuttle

Jake Tuttle, an African American male AP with 3 years of administrative experience, demonstrates characteristics consistent with a Proficient-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Mr. Tuttle's commitment to social justice is deeply rooted in his upbringing in Alabama's Black Belt region, driving his advocacy for equitable educational opportunities. His role primarily involves managing student discipline, where he prioritizes progressive discipline practices, restorative conversations, and targeted interventions. Mr. Tuttle explicitly acknowledges the racial discipline gap, attributing it to teachers' implicit biases, cultural misunderstandings, and insufficient relationship-building efforts. He actively challenges systemic inequities by facilitating diversity trainings, advocating at district meetings, and maintaining consistent fairness in disciplinary actions. Mr. Tuttle's reflective practice, openness to feedback, and intentional approach to mitigating disciplinary disparities illustrate competencies aligned with a Proficient-level SJL.

Jessica Meyer

Jessica Meyer, a Black female AP holding an EdD with 25 years of educational experience, demonstrates characteristics of an Expert-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Meyer's leadership journey includes roles as a

special education department chair, instructional specialist, director of special education, principal, and AP across multiple school districts, significantly shaping her leadership through diverse experiences. She firmly believes quality education is a civil right, advocating that strong relationships, equitable practices, and teacher accountability are crucial to student success. Ms. Meyer dedicates approximately 35%–40% of her day managing student behavior through proactive, relationship-driven approaches, consistently prioritizing restorative conversations and minimizing exclusionary practices. She identifies strongly with advocacy and fostering a sense of belonging, drawing heavily from her background in special education and personal educational experiences. Ms. Meyer actively works to combat misconceptions and biases against students of color, demonstrating nuanced skill in navigating disciplinary decisions and ensuring equity through rigorous inquiry and clear, consistent policy implementation. Ms. Meyer emphasizes, "Relationships matter; discipline shouldn't be punitive and should align with the infraction," underscoring her commitment to equity-driven discipline. Additionally, she states, "People shouldn't feel marginalized or left out; they shouldn't walk away from any experience feeling diminished or unseen," highlighting her deep commitment to advocacy and belonging.

Jade Chambers

Jade Chambers, a Black female AP with 20 years of educational experience at a K-8 school in the Southeast, demonstrates characteristics consistent with an Expert-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Chambers's leadership journey includes roles in school improvement, turnaround leadership, central office district leadership, principalship, and assistant principalship in Title I settings. She

deeply values education as a tool for equity, strongly advocating for systemic changes to improve outcomes for all students, particularly marginalized groups. Ms. Chambers dedicates over 50% of her daily responsibilities to managing student behavior through proactive, restorative approaches rather than punitive measures, emphasizing the importance of understanding root causes and advocating for equitable discipline practices. Her leadership is heavily influenced by personal experiences growing up in environments with evident educational disparities, which shaped her commitment to social justice and equity. Ms. Chambers consistently employs courageous conversations, data-driven decision-making, and transparent, collaborative approaches to discipline and policy implementation, actively addressing implicit biases and systemic inequities within her school community. Ms. Chambers defines her role by stating, "Being a social justice leader means using my position, my voice, my sphere of influence, my access, and my experience to improve outcomes for all student groups." She further emphasizes the moral responsibility involved, asserting, "You have to do what's right, even if it's unpopular."

Lark Boothe

Lark Boothe, a White female AP with 17 years of educational experience, demonstrates characteristics of a Competent-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Boothe transitioned into administration to expand her influence beyond the classroom, emphasizing restorative practices and proactive discipline through strong relationships, clear communication, and consistent follow-through. Her social justice leadership is informed by equity-focused coursework and experiences, highlighting the importance of hiring representative staff and using

culturally responsive curriculum materials. Ms. Boothe acknowledges her role in addressing systemic inequities, reflecting, “I handle what’s brought to me, so I am contributing to [the racial discipline gap], but the kids are being sent to me,” underscoring her reflective practice. She firmly believes, “Every kid [should have] what they need to be successful,” demonstrating her commitment to equitable student support and outcomes.

Clara Romero

Clara Romero, a Black female AP with 17 years of educational experience, demonstrates characteristics consistent with a Competent-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Romero’s leadership trajectory evolved naturally from teacher-leadership roles focused on mentoring, instructional coaching, and PD, which fostered her transition into administration to amplify her impact on students and staff. Her approach to discipline is proactive and restorative, centering on understanding the root causes of student behaviors, particularly at the elementary level. Ms. Romero emphasizes the critical importance of relationships, noting, “Kids don’t work for people they don’t like . . . relationship is a foundation for behavior and classroom management.” She acknowledges the existence of the racial discipline gap, attributing it primarily to teacher perceptions, implicit biases, and a lack of cultural understanding. Ms. Romero actively works to combat these issues through culturally responsive interventions, restorative practices, and ongoing teacher education. Reflecting on her role in addressing systemic inequities, she stated, “I think perception and miseducation mostly, not understanding and not a willingness to understand [are factors contributing to the racial discipline gap].” Ms. Romero’s commitment to equity is

reinforced by her dedication to continuous learning and advocacy within her school community.

Myrtle Hill

Myrtle Hill, a Black female AP with 12 years of educational experience, exhibits characteristics consistent with a Competent-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Ms. Hill began her educational career as a history teacher, progressing into leadership roles, including grade-level chair and committee leadership, ultimately transitioning into administration at her rural, predominantly Black middle school. She emphasizes a relationship-centered approach to discipline, considering students' backgrounds and home lives, believing deeply that effective discipline requires knowing the students personally. Ms. Hill's philosophy is clearly reflected in her assertion, "You have to know that particular child, know what's going to impact them the most," highlighting her nuanced understanding of individual student needs. She demonstrates an active commitment to equity, identifying herself explicitly as a social justice advocate who passionately supports her students: "Whatever it takes for my babies, I will do it." Ms. Hill recognizes and critiques the racial discipline gap within her broader district context, noting disparities between predominantly Black and predominantly White schools in disciplinary practices, and advocates strongly to limit exclusionary discipline on her campus, emphasizing educational continuity and equity for her students.

Iris Kale

Iris Kale, a Black female AP with 24 years of educational experience, demonstrates characteristics of a Competent-level SJL according to the Dreyfus Five-

Stage Model (Honken, 2013). Her professional journey includes significant experience with at-risk students, predominantly in disciplinary roles. Ms. Kale strongly advocates for equitable disciplinary practices, highlighting the substantial racial discipline gap present in her predominantly white-led institution. She attributes this gap to cultural misunderstandings, implicit bias, and a lack of meaningful relationships between white educators and students of color. Ms. Kale emphasizes restorative approaches to discipline, consistently prioritizing relationship-building and student growth over punitive measures, believing deeply in addressing underlying issues rather than relying on suspensions: "I feel like suspension is the easy way out . . . you're not teaching them." Ms. Kale acknowledges barriers such as being the only advocate explicitly pushing for equity among administrators, stating, "The people who are causing the racial gap can't even see that they're the problem." Despite challenges, including resistance from colleagues and isolation within her administrative team, she remains committed to combating inequities through persistent advocacy and student-centered disciplinary decisions.

Findings and Emergent Themes

After conducting 20 interviews, the analysis revealed six major findings, with each finding containing two to four emergent themes. The first finding focused on the development of a social justice identity among APs, addressing RQ1. The second finding explored APs' perspectives on the racial discipline gap, and the third examined teacher practices related to this gap, corresponding to RQ2 and its subquestions. The fourth finding investigated the actions taken by APs to close the racial discipline gap, also aligning with RQ2 and its subquestions. Additionally, Findings 5 and 6 addressed the

discipline referral processes and the influence exerted by APs in these processes, specifically aligning with RQ3 and its subquestions. Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the research questions, corresponding findings and themes, and their alignment with the study's conceptual framework. Following the table, the discussion section delves into a detailed analysis of each finding with its emergent themes, presenting the voices of the APs and their perceptions regarding the issue.

Table 2

Overview of Findings

Research questions	Findings & themes	Connection to conceptual framework
RQ1: How do APs develop a social justice identity?	Finding 1: Social justice identity development of APs Themes • Defining social justice • Lived experiences • Observed experiences	• Grounded social justice identity construction • Retrospective
RQ2: How do APs identified as social justice leaders make sense of and work towards closing the racial discipline gap, if at all? Subquestion: What actions or strategies, if any, do APs use to close the racial discipline gap and systemic barriers within school discipline?	Finding 2: APs' perspectives on contributing factors to the racial discipline gap Themes • Structural inequities • Implicit bias • Deficiency in cultural competence	• Focused on and extracted by cues • Grounded social justice identity instruction • Retrospective
	Finding 3: Teachers and the racial discipline gap Themes • Teachers' lack of understanding of the racial discipline gap • Engaging teachers to advance the closing of the racial discipline gap • Contending with the challenges	• Retrospective • Social identity construction • Transformative leadership • Enactive of sensible environments
	Finding 4: APs closing the racial discipline gap Themes • APs' social justice identity drives change • Building relationships	• Retrospective • Social • Grounded social justice identity

Research questions	Findings & themes	Connection to conceptual framework
	• Student advocacy	• Transformative leadership
RQ3: How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools?	Finding 5: Processing discipline/behavioral referrals Themes • The discipline/behavioral referral process • Teacher referral considerations • Student referral considerations	• Ongoing • Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy • Social • Enactive of sensible environments
	• Environmental/contextual factors • Determining the truth	• Grounded in social justice identity • Transformative leadership
Subquestion: What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process?	Finding 6: Factors that influence the discipline process Themes • Relational factors • District policy	• Social • Ongoing • Enactive of sensible environments • Transformative leadership

Finding 1: Social Justice Identity Development of APs

Organizational sensemaking begins with identity construction. In addressing the first research question about APs and the development of their social justice identity, a major finding revealed the substantial impact of this identity development on their ability to help close the racial discipline gap. Among the 20 participants, 14 attributed their development as SJLs to their lived experiences or "personal encounters," whereas four participants credited their professional experiences or "observing injustices faced by others" for shaping this identity. In this section, I present the three themes that emerged on social justice identity development, starting with APs' definitions of social justice, followed by their lived experiences and professional experiences. These themes shed light on the pathways through which APs define and cultivate their social justice identity and how these experiences drive their efforts to address the racial discipline gap.

Defining Social Justice

Investigating the APs' personal definitions of social justice leadership provided deeper insight into their beliefs, values, and experiences, which was crucial for grasping how the APs cultivated their social justice identities and how these experiences fueled their efforts to address the racial discipline gap. Participants used terms such as "courage," "disruptor," and "champion" to define social justice leadership. Kate Dart, in particular, described social justice using words like "warrior" and "advocate." She added:

> That's huge. As a social justice leader, I already see myself as an advocate, but I believe the next step is to become a social justice warrior. This means making changes to ensure that existing systems work for everyone. To me, being a social justice warrior involves challenging untruths and dispelling myths in conversations with colleagues, and most importantly, listening to students. The key question is: how can I be part of a system that allows every student to succeed?

In the above quote, Ms. Dart embraced her social justice identity by describing herself as an advocate who aspires to become a social justice warrior. She believed this involved making systemic changes, challenging untruths, dispelling myths, and listening to students to ensure every student can succeed. Other participants also discussed systemic changes when defining social justice leadership. Israel Little stated an SJL is one who understands both the visible and hidden systems that oppress marginalized groups. Mr. Little stated:

> I think a social justice leader understands the systems, including the old, neutral, and hidden systems that work against marginalized groups. It's about recognizing these systems and knowing how to navigate them so that when situations arise, you can make the best decisions for those students and guide them to make the best decisions for themselves.

Mr. Little shared that he felt it was not only about raising awareness about the hidden systems that hinder or work against marginalized groups, but also building the efficacy of his students to make the best decisions for themselves. Jackson Glisson shared a similar sentiment. To him, "it's about really examining all of our policies, all our procedures, all of the things we do in the building and making sure that we're equitable in our decision making." Morris Polk defined an SJL as someone with the moral courage to disrupt and dismantle the systems that harm marginalized groups. This requires acting, not just observing, and making the necessary changes to become a more supportive leader. Mr. Polk stated:

> A social justice leader, I define it as someone with the moral courage to disrupt and dismantle systems and structures that do not benefit marginalized subgroups or communities. Going back to courage, it takes a lot to take action. People can observe and know what to do, but the key is actually putting yourself out there and making the necessary changes to be a more supportive leader. The biggest question is, "So what now? I have this information, but what am I going to do with it? How am I going to build and empower others to support this vision?"

Other participants used the word disruptor as well. Melinda Plaza described herself as both an advocate and a disruptor. Many participants aligned themselves with the definitions they provided for social justice leadership. This alignment was best captured in Ms. Plaza's quote: "I've had people say they're disruptors, advocating against systemic racism in their school systems. Others have said they're advocates or that they name issues and support students. I definitely name issues, but I also try to disrupt them." Ms. Plaza shared that though some individuals identify as disruptors, advocates, or supporters in their efforts against systemic racism in school systems, she saw herself as someone who not only identified issues but actively worked to disrupt and address these types of issues. Jade Chambers acted in the same vein by "using [her] position, voice, sphere of influence, access, and experience to improve outcomes for all student groups."

The next participant defined an SJL as someone who acknowledges individual differences and biases. Bud Baker emphasized the importance of self-awareness and introspection to understand one's own biases, which was challenging for him as a White male in a predominantly minority setting. Mr. Baker shared:

> I think I define a social justice leader as someone who is aware that everyone is different and that biases affect everyone. To champion social justice, you first have to understand yourself and recognize your own biases. This was very hard for me during my multiple implicit bias training sessions. As a White male in a predominantly minority setting, I had to take a step back and examine who I was and what my biases were.

Mr. Baker believed that to champion social justice, one must introspectively understand and accept their own biases, consider others' biases, and seek common ground. Achieving social justice is challenging and requires significant effort on social, national, and systemic levels, beginning with honest and difficult conversations with both students and staff. Mr. Baker continued:

> To be a champion of social justice, you need to introspectively look at your own biases, understand them, and become comfortable with them. Then, consider what others' biases might be and find a middle ground. Social justice is not easy to achieve; it requires a lot of work, not only socially and nationally but also systematically within our educational system. It starts with having honest and hard conversations, not just with students but also with your staff.

This was the first time for several of the participants in this study to have the opportunity to define social justice leadership. Kay Holmes shared that years and experience within the field of education gave one more legitimacy to being an SJL. Viola Rowse stated, "Oh, I like that question. I never defined that." She shared:

> So how do I define being a social justice leader? It's about fighting for the rights to equitable education for all my students. There is still a lot to be done, but I continue to fight for my current students because injustices still exist. It's just who I am, and I incorporate it into my everyday job. It's innate. If you're going to be an educator, wherever you work, you have to include social justice as part of your fiber. You can't support education and youth without being a social justice leader. It's connected.

Ms. Rowse believed an SJL in education fights for equitable education for all students, addressing ongoing injustices. She expressed that this commitment was an innate part of her identity and daily work. She believed that for all educators, especially those who work with vulnerable populations, social justice must be integral to their role. In the same mind, when providing her definition of social justice leadership, Jessica Meyer shared that she had "always had an advocacy spirit and an equity-minded perspective, promoting belonging." She attributed this to her time spent as a special educator. From a very young age, she knew she would work with and advocate for people with differing abilities. Jessica Meyer stated:

> When I think about social justice leadership, it's about the people entrusted to you. You're setting a framework and creating a vision with your team. I don't think I would ever define that in isolation. Maybe that's why it's such a tough question for me to answer . . . I think of words like advocacy, awareness, understanding, and competency. If I were to lead those under my tutelage, there would be conversations around these concepts. How do we see ourselves?

When reflecting on social justice leadership, Jessica Meyers defined it as including such words as advocacy, awareness, understanding, and competency. Social justice leadership involves engaging in conversations about these concepts and fostering self-reflection on how we perceive ourselves.

Lark Boothe viewed social justice leadership as ensuring every student has the resources they need to succeed, particularly in achieving grade-level proficiency in reading and math. Ms. Boothe shared:

> It sounds simple, but for me, it's about making sure that every kid has what they need to be successful. My idea of success is that they leave school on grade level, so they're set up to have options. In elementary school, if students leave without being able to read or do math at the appropriate level, by the time they get to middle school, they're often placed in remedial classes, limiting their options . . . I may not have labeled myself as a social justice leader before, but if you ask me now, I would say yes, I am a social justice leader.

According to this definition of social justice leadership, taking this stance assists with preventing students from being placed in remedial classes in middle school, which can restrict their future opportunities. Although Ms. Boothe may not have previously been self-identified as an SJL, she now embraced this title after having the confidence of defining during the interview.

Lived Experiences

Participants delved into their personal lived experiences and shared personal journeys that added to the development of their social justice identities. Morris Polk, a Black male, delved deeply into the intricate interplay among personal identity, societal stereotypes, and the educational landscape. Mr. Polk shared, "I would say, specifically just me, I identify as a Black male and so my personal lived experiences have shaped how I advocate specifically for male students but also Black male students." With a keen awareness of the disparities and biases that pervade the experiences of Black male

students, Mr. Morris articulated how his own journey shaped his social justice identity. Through his words, he challenged the monolithic narratives imposed upon Black males, emphasizing the importance of recognizing individuality and providing tailored support within educational settings. Mr. Polk continued:

> Black male students in general are stereotyped regarding behaviors and labeled as being aggressive and then drilling down to like Black boys there's no grace for Black boys like Black boys have to be in a sense perfect mild mannered professional smiling, things of that nature and understanding that, again, like I said earlier, everyone has different sort of, you know, characteristics right and so being a Black male is not a monolithic experience, but people label Black males as [if] it's a monolithic experience

In another personal reflection, Melinda Plaza shared the profound influence of her upbringing, cultural values, and lived experiences as a minority low-income student on her journey toward developing a social justice identity: "Just my own personal experiences in where and how I grew up and my cultural values and things like that. And also, the things that I've experienced as a minority low-income student myself and the opportunities that did not exist for me." Jessica Meyer shared her journey of self-discovery and advocacy, shaped by her experiences as a high school student in a predominately White high school and later attending an HBCU for college. She recounted instances of encountering racial stereotypes and being asked to speak for her race, highlighting the challenges she faced as one of the few Black students in her high school. Ms. Meyer stated:

> As a high school student in a predominantly White school district in the '80s, I was told urban Blacks couldn't afford to play tennis and was often asked to speak for my race. There were very few Black students. Attending an HBCU for undergrad helped me recognize my own value and beauty. In turn, I saw the same in others and became passionate about elevating that awareness for everyone.

The next reflection shared was from Jade Chambers, who grew up on a small island territory of the United States. In this reflection, we gain firsthand insight into the

inequalities embedded within the education system that Ms. Chambers witnessed. Her story not only reflected her personal journey but also shed light on the pathway through which Ms. Chambers developed her social justice identity. Ms. Chambers shared:

> As a child, I grew up on a very small island, a territory of the United States, and I did well in school. I didn't have a hard time. I was present. I could focus on what I was doing. I had no real distractors. I ate well. I was clothed and loved. I had no barriers of that sort, but I can see where I had classmates that did not all have all those components. And so, I saw where this sort of thing took place in elementary school.

Observed Experiences

Participants discussed their observed experiences in education that contributed to their development of a social justice identity. The excerpt below from Barclay Bond's interview highlighted his journey of continuous learning and personal growth toward becoming an SJL within the educational context. Mr. Bond emphasized the importance of actively listening to and acknowledging the perspectives of others, particularly those who directly experience inequities. Mr. Bond shared:

> I'm constantly learning. A true social justice leader, in my opinion, prioritizes listening to people and understanding where they perceive inequities lie, because inequity isn't something you possess; it's something others experience. So, the first step is to actively listen and discern the true social injustices. Then, systematically assessing our programs and systems becomes crucial, pinpointing areas that require change based on these identified inequities.

Mr. Bond continued and recounted a transformative moment that occurred during his second year as an AP in his current school district, where he was exposed to discussions on equity issues within administrative meetings. Barclay Bond stated:

> In my second year in this district, I began attending administrative meetings on equity. Before that, working in predominantly White schools, I hadn't fully realized how my privilege affected fairness. Over the past 5 years, being in a diverse environment has broadened my perspective. A decade ago, I may have been more closed-minded, but these past years have reshaped my understanding of education.

This experience challenged Mr. Bond's prior assumptions and made him confront his own privilege. Not unlike Mr. Bond's experience, Bud Baker's perspectives on social justice were reshaped and convictions strengthened. The following quote captures the profound evolution of Mr. Baker's understanding, rooted in childhood experiences and magnified by observations of systemic inequities in his observed experiences. Mr. Baker shared:

> My experience at my previous school opened my eyes to social justice. I hate suspending kids—they belong in school. I was suspended once as a child, but my mom advocated for in-school suspension because taking me out wouldn't help. Over the past 5 or 6 years, I've seen how young Black men are suspended far more often for the same behaviors as others, which truly opened my eyes.

In the journey toward creating an equitable educational environment, observed experiences often served as catalysts for transformative change. Mr. Baker's experience appeared to be the catalyst that jolted him and others within his school district to take notice and act. Mr. Baker said:

> And, you know, we think of the city as a very non-segregated place, and it's not. The city is one of the most segregated places you can ever live. You know, it's based off of socioeconomics. I mean, how many Black people live on the Upper Side? I think looking at suspension rates nationally, then looking at suspension rates in our own area was very, very disconcerting to me. I know it was disconcerting to my superintendent and those who I work with, and that's why we kind of went through the social justice training and implemented that district-wide.

In 1994, early in her teaching career, Kay Holmes had a pivotal moment when she encountered her first English language learner (ELL) needing support. She recalled:

> Teaching middle school, I was struck by the contrast to my predominantly White upbringing, where encountering non-English speakers was rare. I remember my first ELL student in health class. I went to the counselor and said, "Hey, this student doesn't speak English." The counselor replied, "Well, I'll just move his class." And I thought, "That won't make him start speaking English." I wanted to help students who couldn't access the curriculum—even if I couldn't articulate it that way back then.

Later in her career, Ms. Holmes learned the power of speaking up. As a physical education department chair, she encountered resistance when advocating for a candidate with expertise in African dance. She reflected:

> Looking back at 1994, I realize the importance of advocating for inclusivity. I once faced pushback when suggesting we interview someone with a background in African dance. Though I felt intimidated, I've learned that silence perpetuates issues. Speaking up against injustice is crucial, even when it means challenging authority.

Like Mr. Baker, Ms. Holmes's convictions strengthened over her 28-year career. She acknowledged: "My journey has taught me the power of using my voice. While I admire younger colleagues who assert themselves early, it took me years to build the courage to speak up." Ms. Holmes's journey reflects how social identity development varies. Finding one's voice in professional settings is shaped by personal experiences, cultural background, and organizational norms, often requiring time and growth.

Israel Little shared a transformative experience that deepened his understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline and its impact on marginalized communities. He recalled:

> A judge in my city was taking kickbacks from adjudicated facilities for sending Black and Brown boys there. The numbers showed these facilities stayed packed because of him, and the kids knew and hated him. He was eventually caught and sentenced to 20 or 30 years, and every kid he placed had to be released.

This revelation reinforced for Mr. Little that the school-to-prison pipeline is real and demands attention: "If we don't examine the systems pushing Black and Brown children toward incarceration, we risk allowing slavery to be rebranded through the penal system. That realization made me pay closer attention to how we suspend and label kids." This experience prompted Mr. Little to critically examine systemic inequalities in education and the judicial system, emphasizing the importance of advocacy and reform in how students are labeled and supported.

Summary of Finding 1

Finding 1 revealed that APs significantly develop social justice identities through personal and professional experiences, which empowers them to address the racial discipline gap in schools. Fourteen of the 20 APs cited lived experiences, such as personal encounters with inequality, as shaping their commitment to social justice, whereas others pointed to professional observations of systemic inequities. APs defined social justice leadership through qualities like courage, advocacy, and disruption of unjust systems, viewing themselves as "warriors" who actively challenge and reshape policies to support marginalized students. Personal reflections illustrated how unique experiences, including minority backgrounds or witnessing the school-to-prison pipeline, deepened their understanding and dedication to equity.

Finding 2: APs' Perspectives on Contributing Factors to the Racial Discipline Gap

The second finding focused on the perspectives of APs regarding the contributing factors to the racial discipline gap. This finding addressed RQ2 as the participants shared their attitudes, beliefs, and practices concerning disciplinary measures and how they may affect marginalized students. From this finding, three themes emerged: structural inequities, implicit bias, and deficiency in cultural competence.

Structural inequities refer to systemic barriers and inequalities ingrained within the education system that sustain disproportionate discipline outcomes. Participants highlighted how policies, practices, and resource distribution can disadvantage specific student groups, especially those belonging to marginalized communities. Participants discussed how implicit biases within the educational system have contributed to disproportionate discipline outcomes for marginalized students. Participants described the

deficiency in cultural competence among educators to disciplinary actions perceived as insensitive or unfair to students from marginalized backgrounds.

Finding 2 and its themes are directly linked to several tenets of the conceptual framework, particularly transformative and social justice leadership. They intersect with three principles from Weick's organizational sensemaking: identity construction or development, extracted cues, and retrospective examination. This provided a blueprint through which the APs were able to identify the various factors that contribute to the racial discipline gap within educational environments.

Structural Inequities

The APs shared their perspectives of the contributing factors to the racial discipline gap. The first factor that emerged was structural inequities. The first structural disparity that emerged in the findings was in the area of special education. Mr. Little highlighted this disproportionality:

> So, this again, is race . . . the contributing factors. Obviously access to resources, school area, school demographics, parent involvement in the schools, the race and ethnicity of the principal and the vice principal and the dean and the students, code of conduct, who's written it, that designation of special education and what it looks like in affluent schools and what it looks like in the low socioeconomic communities. I mean, in some places, it's night and day.

Mr. Little highlighted disparities in special education, and Melinda Plaza pointed to the overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students in special education and their increased likelihood of facing exclusionary discipline. She noted:

> In our school, Black students, especially males in special education, are more likely to face exclusionary discipline than their non-Black peers. Similarly, Hispanic students in special education or learning English experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline. These trends mirror national patterns.

Ms. Plaza contrasted how special education resources are seamlessly integrated in affluent areas while often stigmatized in lower-income communities. Israel Little shared a personal example:

> The stigma of special education in urban schools differs sharply from wealthier areas. My 8-year-old has an IEP and needs constant one-to-one support, yet his peers have far more freedom. In urban schools, wraparound services like Behavior Specialist Consultants (BSC) and mobile therapists are common, but they are often absent in affluent neighborhoods. This raises questions about equity and access to resources.

The contrast in available support services underscores the systemic inequalities in special education and the broader issue of equitable resource distribution.

Another contributing factor referenced by a participant dates back to the "Joe Clark Era," where zero tolerance policies disproportionately targeted Black and Brown students. Jackson Glisson shared:

> The racial discipline gap persists due to how discipline is documented. In affluent schools, job security and finances influence discipline, favoring students like Billy Joe over Bilal. At Joe Clark High School, a zero tolerance policy stifles critical thinking, branding Bilal as a disrupter instead of a thinker like Billy Joe. This bias needs to be addressed.

Mr. Glisson called for acknowledgment and rectification of disparities in disciplinary practices. The perspectives shared by the participants highlight structural inequities within education, particularly concerning the racial discipline gap. Disparities in special education representation, disciplinary actions, and student treatment reflect broader societal issues of race, ethnicity, and access to resources. Mr. Little, Ms. Plaza, and Mr. Glisson emphasized the urgent need to confront systemic biases and reform inequitable practices in schools.

Implicit Bias

Another contributor to the racial discipline gap that the participants identified was implicit bias. Many of the participants noted these biases manifesting in various aspects of society that affect educators' views of students. The two most prevalent issues that surfaced were media representation and institutional structures. The participants suggested these biases perpetuate stereotypes, hinder opportunities, and contribute to the systemic inequalities experienced by marginalized groups in educational settings. An example of this came from Morris Polk, who stated:

> I think that there's some policies and procedures that need to be shifted. The expectations and bias for particular subgroups of students is unacceptable. I've read some studies about middle school Black female students. Who are disciplined at a higher rate than their White female students like that's an issue. And so I think we know that's an issue, but again going back to the action part, what are we going to do about it . . .

Mr. Polk's perspective brought to the forefront the issue of the adultification of Black girls, as he highlighted how societal perceptions often rob them of their childhood innocence and treat them as adults before their time. This phenomenon is rooted in racial biases and stereotypes, resulting in harmful consequences for the development and well-being of Black girls. Similarly, another participant highlighted the same phenomenon in her response. Jessica Meyer shared:

> I think there's this misunderstanding of Black girls . . . what is it, adultification, right? Where they want to make them be women at 12 [years old]. And it's just like, no, she's actually 9 [years old]. So this misconception that Black girls are beyond their years of maturity.

Ms. Meyer echoed Mr. Polk's concerns about the adultification of Black girls and highlighted another student group affected by stereotypes:

> This misconception that Black boys are misfits, right? There are socio-stereotypical misconceptions about who we are as a people and about other races as well. I think it starts at home, in the media, and in how we are depicted—the

> narrative that's out there about us. Then there's institutionalized racism and oppression. These experiences have limited us, creating glass ceilings and barriers we struggle to move beyond. That, in turn, shapes how the world sees us.

This participant also brought attention to how media depictions contribute to misconceptions and stereotypes, shaping societal attitudes and perceptions. This underscores the role of the media in reinforcing implicit biases and perpetuating the harmful narratives that affect students. Continuing in the same vein, Clara Romero discussed what she witnessed in response to dress code infractions:

> I recall a conversation involving Principal [name], possibly with Gloria Ladson-Billings, about a young Black boy repeatedly disciplined for wearing a cap—raising the question of why Black students are singled out. This highlights how teacher perceptions influence discipline. I've seen similar biases in uniform enforcement, where students without coats are reprimanded for wearing hoodies for warmth. In past experiences, I've also noticed disproportionate disciplinary actions against Black students.

This quote delves into the impact of implicit bias in educational settings, particularly regarding discipline and cultural sensitivity. The participant highlighted how biases influence disciplinary actions and underscored the importance of addressing them through equitable policies and culturally responsive teaching.

Deficiency in Cultural Competence

Contributing to the racial discipline gap, as identified by the participants, is the deficiency in cultural competence among educators. Craig Tetter suggests the racial discipline gap is just not caused by inherent differences between races, but instead results from a deficiency in understanding when working with Black and Brown students or a failure of schools to prioritize cultural proficiency and equity in their policies. Mr. Tetter shared:

> My perspective is that there is an over-representation of students of color in disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion. I don't believe there is a significant difference between students of color and their White counterparts.

> However, I attribute this to a lack of understanding when working with Black and brown students, or schools and districts not implementing policies that prioritize cultural proficiency and equity. Therefore, I think these factors contribute to why Black and Brown students are more likely to face suspension for the same infractions as their White peers.

Melinda Plaza shared the same type of sentiments as Mr. Tetter. Her stance was that there is a misunderstanding between cultures. Ms. Plaza noted:

> I believe there might be a misunderstanding between the various cultural perspectives of teachers and students. For instance, when a teacher issues a referral citing a student's disrespect, it's possible that what the teacher perceives as disrespectful behavior may not align with the student's intentions or their cultural norms regarding respect. This discrepancy highlights a need for greater cultural competency, wherein educators grasp how different cultures express themselves and comprehend the underlying intentions.

Ms. Plaza suggested there is a need for educators to enhance their cultural competency. In agreement with Ms. Plaza's point, Clara Romero's perspective was that it is miseducation. Ms. Romero recounted a situation where a Black male student was written up by his White teacher for using a colloquial expression ("slap the Black off of him") that was not understood by the teacher in its cultural context. Ms. Romero shared:

> I think it's misperception and miseducation. Miseducation mostly, not an understanding and not a willingness to understand. Like I had one student, whose teacher wrote him up because he told another Black boy he was going to slap the Black off of him, which I thought was quite funny. But I didn't think it warranted a write-up. Like, do you really understand what that means? He was upset. He didn't do it. He just made the inference that he was going to do that.

Ms. Romero highlighted the lack of understanding and willingness by the teacher to comprehend the cultural nuances, leading to inappropriate disciplinary actions. The next two participants attributed this lack of cultural competence to upbringing and life experiences. Iris Kale stated:

> Cultural differences, life differences? So if someone hasn't lived or hasn't grown up or experienced some of the life experiences of the students that they're making decisions for, and they don't have empathy for those situations, then they can't even begin to understand how their approaches should be different.

Ms. Kale emphasized the importance of understanding cultural and life differences when making decisions for students. Andrea Blake was in alignment with the perspective given by Ms. Kale. Ms. Blake shared:

> I believe it's influenced by upbringing, one's background, childhood experiences, and the environment they were exposed to. Sometimes, individuals aren't even aware of their actions; it's ingrained in them, perhaps by cultural or social media influences. It's not necessarily intentional, but it's a reality. Some individuals naturally react based on their upbringing and surroundings.

Ms. Blake's perspective suggests people's behavior and actions, particularly with regard to the racial discipline gap, are influenced by their upbringing, background, childhood experiences, and environment. Ms. Blake acknowledged that individuals may not always be conscious of their actions, as they may be shaped by their own cultural influences. Though not always intentional, these influences can affect how individuals react based on their upbringing and surroundings.

Summary of Finding 2

The second finding delved into the perspectives of APs regarding the factors contributing to the racial discipline gap. It addressed participants' perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, and practices concerning the contributors to the racial discipline gap and their impact on marginalized students. Three themes emerged: structural inequities, implicit bias, and deficiency in cultural competence. These findings bring forth participants' viewpoints on the root causes, raise awareness of the complexities surrounding discipline in education, and provide insight into addressing and mitigating the racial discipline gap within school settings. The insights provided by the participants underscored the urgent need for addressing systemic biases, rectifying inequitable practices, and promoting cultural competence within educational institutions. By raising awareness of these issues and advocating for transformative and socially just leadership, steps can be taken to

mitigate the racial discipline gap and create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

Finding 3: Teachers and the Racial Discipline Gap

Teachers play a pivotal role in either perpetuating or ameliorating the racial discipline gap within schools. Most participants expressed that one of the most prevalent barriers to closing the racial discipline gap stems from the teacher. For example, Morris Polk stated, "When advocating for social justice on campus, I often encounter barriers such as resistance from teachers who disagree with my decision-making processes or feel unsupported by those decisions." This section addresses RQ2's subquestion. From this finding, three themes emerged: teachers' lack of understanding of the racial discipline gap, engaging teachers to advance the closing of the racial discipline gap, and contending with the challenges. This section explores how APs address the challenge of teacher resistance and the strategies they employ to engage and develop teachers in efforts to close the racial discipline gap. This finding is linked to several tenets of the conceptual framework, particularly transformative and social justice leadership. Additionally, it intersects with three principles from Weick's organizational sensemaking: identity construction or development, enactment of sensible environments, and retrospective examination.

Teachers' Lack of Understanding of the Racial Discipline Gap

In this theme, participants shared their thoughts on teachers' lack of understanding of the racial discipline gap. Participants shared that one cause of this lack of understanding can be attributed to the disparaging statements some teachers use that

overlook or minimize the real experiences and challenges faced by individuals from different racial backgrounds. Craig Tetter shared:

> Sometimes I hear statements like "I don't see color" or "I'm already doing enough for these kids," and honestly, it makes me cringe. So, I find myself asking them to reflect on their own words. Instead of just reacting with my feelings, I try to prompt them to think about their perspectives. For example, if someone says, "These kids can't do this," I'll ask them, "How do you know? Have you tried different approaches? Have you sought advice?" I aim to make them reconsider their assumptions. However, I often face resistance when confronting certain remarks or denial of racism.

Teacher resistance, according to the participants, takes many forms. One form of resistance that participants brought attention to was resistance to change. Kate Dart stated:

> I've noticed certain emails filtering in, and what strikes me is a sense of indifference. Imagine this scenario: there's a student in your class, present day in and day out, yet they're struggling academically. Have we made the effort to connect with their parent or guardian? Unfortunately, this seems to be a recurring pattern. It appears that some members of our staff are hesitant to adapt their approach when it comes to supporting students, particularly those facing trauma.

The next participant echoed the sentiments of the previous participant. Viola Rowse questioned the necessity of change and acknowledged resistance to it among some teachers, likening their desire to keep things the same as a decade ago. Ms. Rowse shared:

> Why do we have to change? They resist change. If they had their way, the school would remain the same as it was in 1985. We have teachers who have been there for that long or close to it. That's what I'm saying, at least for now. I can try to work on it, but I haven't figured out how genuine their resistance is, or if they're just complicating things on purpose. I'm not really sure what you're asking me. What does that change look like? I've provided multiple examples, and they still seem confused. I haven't been able to determine if that confusion is genuine or if they're trying to deceive me.

The above quotes reflected resistance from teachers to changing their methods or approaches. The participants cited the teacher's preference for the way things have always been done. Another example of this came from Jackson Glisson:

> Experience, right? People tend to stick to what they've done before, unable to change their mindset. They don't see anything wrong with it; it's just how things have always been done in the family. So, it's about adjusting mindsets. Also, there are outdated policies we need to navigate. Even if we can't change the policy, we can adjust our thinking and approach. Closed-minded mindsets and prejudices are challenges we all face. We need to be aware of them and push through.

Mr. Glisson emphasized the tendency for people to cling to familiar experiences, making it difficult to adopt new perspectives. He highlighted the influence of tradition and outdated policies in shaping these mindsets.

Engaging Teachers to Advance the Closing of the Racial Discipline Gap

The next element of this finding explored by the participants focused on the strategies they used to involve teachers in assisting with closing the racial discipline gap. They emphasized approaches like PD, book studies, and the use of data as some of the key methods for addressing this issue. Craig Tetter shared:

> I think it's crucial to illuminate the data, whether it's academic, discipline, or attendance data, qualitative or quantitative. We need to start with that so they can see the importance of it, especially considering the demographics of the school. At the beginning of equity dialogues, we all developed norms because everyone is coming from different levels and different affinity groups. I want to make sure that folks are comfortable engaging in the conversation and being vulnerable. That takes time to develop trust. Just talking about the particular data and its effects or the reasons behind it, those things are important as we enter those conversations to be able to dig deeper.

Mr. Tetter discussed how his school, which predominantly served minority students, responded to new cultural proficiency standards. Using data-driven discussions, the school focused on thoughtful behavior management, favoring the use of RP over punitive measures like suspension. These efforts were integrated into broader equity dialogues that

established norms for comfortable participation, aiming to build trust and deepen the understanding of policy impacts on diverse student demographics.

The next participant similarly emphasized the importance of reflection in educational settings, encouraging teachers to regularly review their classroom policies and lesson plans through a data-driven lens. Jackson Glisson stated:

> To me, it's fundamentally about reflection. We need teachers to reflect on their classroom policies and lesson plans. This reflection should be data-driven. For example, if students are struggling on a unit test, teachers should consider what could have been done differently to help them reach their goals. Are teachers truly considering how their lessons relate to every single student?

Mr. Glisson's strategy involved identifying specific students who may need more targeted support and adapting lesson plans to meet their needs effectively. This reflective practice aimed to enhance instructional methods and bridge educational gaps by adjusting teaching strategies based on direct feedback and performance data. Mr. Glisson continued:

> I advocate for a practice where teachers actively identify specific students who may need more attention and tailor their lessons accordingly. Often, I'll discuss with a teacher about particular students who are struggling. I'll then ask for the next lesson to specifically address how it can meet the needs of these students and evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

The next approach emphasized by various participants focused on PD. Viola Rowse elaborated on a PD session initiated at the start of the school year that aimed to clarify the difference between equity and equality. Ms. Rowse explained:

> At the start of the school year, during our professional development sessions, we always dedicate time to discussing the concepts of equity versus equality, focusing on teaching the teachers the difference between the two. One familiar activity involves using that well-known image of the three students trying to see over a fence. In a related activity, we give teachers various materials and challenge them to help every member of their group reach the ceiling. This illustrates how some individuals may need more resources than others to achieve the same goal.

Ms. Rowse's activity demonstrated the need for varying levels of support to succeed, highlighting that such differences are entirely acceptable. She emphasized that every child is unique and deserving of affection and the specific resources required to reach their potential. The next participant shared a similar account about his efforts to facilitate understanding and empathy among teachers for their students through monthly diversity training. Bud Baker stated:

> I strive to provide our teachers with practical examples during our diversity training, which we aim to hold at least once a month. In these trainings, we present scenarios that help relate our students' experiences to our teachers. Previously, under my former administration, we planned to conduct a bus tour of our students' neighborhoods. This was intended to give teachers, many of whom do not live in the same areas as our students, a firsthand look at the environments our students come from and the type of communities they live in.

On the same topic, Maia Parkinson shared a powerful experience from a district-led cultural responsiveness training.

> In Spring 2015, while still teaching and pregnant, I was selected for the leadership team to lead train-the-trainer sessions. Our first training took place that fall at a Title I school with a performing arts magnet program. During the session, some teachers made stereotypical comments about students, which led to inappropriate laughter. When I addressed it, I faced scrutiny from my peers.

Ms. Parkinson's concerns were dismissed, with some attributing her reaction to pregnancy hormones.

> Some colleagues later apologized, but after that incident, I was no longer included in the training team. When I stepped out of the room, the assistant principal followed me, asking if I was trying to start a riot—which was never my intention. I decided to step back and focus on working behind the scenes, engaging directly with teachers when necessary.

This experience led her to shift her approach, fostering change through personal connections rather than formal training: "Teachers saw my interactions with students as genuine rather than confrontational, which allowed for productive conversations. I even started a book study with a White colleague on a book by Chris Edmunds, which we read

and discussed together." This strategy proved effective, leading to constructive discussions and inspiring others to adopt a similar approach. Mr. Polk stated:

> We've updated our strategic plan for the next 5 years, with equity as a key component. We've introduced an equity lead and engaged in surveys and conversations focused on the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as our Black and Brown students. We've conducted several book studies, including works on growth mindset, *Move Your Bus* by Ron Clark, and *Culturally Responsive Teaching* by Darling Hammond. These studies have allowed us to deeply examine our norms, attitudes, and beliefs, assessing what works well and what needs to change. This initiative has positioned us as a school committed to doing what's right for our students while still learning and engaging in courageous conversations about equity.

Mr. Polk highlighted the district's commitment to equity in its updated 5-year strategic plan, which includes the appointment of an equity lead and targeted conversations addressing the needs of LGBTQIA+ students and students of color. Through surveys, discussions, and book studies such as *Move Your Bus* by Ron Clark and *Culturally Responsive Teaching* by Darling-Hammond, educators have critically examined their norms, beliefs, and practices. This initiative has solidified the school's dedication to equity, encouraging continuous learning and courageous conversations to better serve all students. Kate Dart provided another example of using book studies as a strategy:

> I definitely provide opportunities for teachers to address their blind spots. For example, we're starting a book club titled Equity Centered Trauma Informed Education with the career tech, education, and math departments. We've discussed it with our departments. Although it's not mandatory, we hope to encourage teachers, especially those facing difficulties with relating to students, to join our book club.

Ms. Dart's example provided an opportunity to assist teachers to address their blind spots, when it comes to being trauma informed in order to relate more to their students more effectively.

Contending With the Challenges

Participants shared that they faced numerous challenges while advocating for social justice within their schools. When asked how they dealt with this adversity, they used phrases like "Just keep pushing," "Not giving up," and "Hit it head-on." One participant mentioned that his spiritual faith in "Allah" helped him face this work on a daily basis, whereas another shared that she knew there was no "magic bullet," but she was determined to continue this work for the kids. In the final theme, participants shared what motivated them to do this work and how they faced the daily challenges of closing the racial discipline gap in schools. Barclay Bond highlighted this key point:

> We have to address one situation at a time, one piece at a time. As we've seen over the past 40 years, nothing has changed if we just let it sit there. We have to keep pushing the boundaries and moving the process forward.

He felt there was a need to tackle issues one step at a time. With the same sentiments, Morris Polk believed in confronting the issues head-on. Mr. Polk stated:

> Let me say that I confront them [teachers] head-on consistently. And my follow-up game is pretty strong in the sense that if I say we're going to do something, and you're supposed to do it and I'm supposed to do something, I'll put it on my calendar to check in and follow up. So you know that if it's not done, then there's an issue, and we need to fix it immediately.

Mr. Polk believed these concerns must be addressed immediately in order to repair the issues. He continued:

> The challenges for me are really about not letting the comments and negative feedback weigh me down, and not letting the deflections deter me from what I'm supposed to be doing. Internally, I have to always remind myself, like I tell people, I have Teflon skin of Teflon—I need to let that stuff bounce off me and continue to do the work. I can't let the negativity or opposing perspectives sway what I want to do.

That same sentiment rang true for Jackson Glisson:

> You can't give up. You've got to keep going at it. You've got to keep trying. You can't have a defeated attitude. You have to push through and help students and teachers get it. Some of them will get it after a while; it just takes time.

Clara Romero's statement supported Mr. Glisson's thought process:

> Just keep pushing. Unfortunately, we're still in an age where people say they see it, but they don't. It's important for them to realize what it means to truly see our differences—all our differences. What does that really mean, and what does it look like? We need to be mindful in everything we do, from the programs we offer to how we communicate with parents. For example, when sending a letter home, we should consider if we're addressing all parents. Do we need to send it in different languages? Is it something that will interest all our families? If not, what needs to be added? I think that's an area where we lack: being able to see everybody.

Myrtle Hill supported her students and their families by using such resources: "We try to work around it. When we can't get the parents involved, we reach out to other teachers or find someone else who can help." Ms. Hill even involved a local judge to support the cause:

> We have a local judge who is very supportive of the students and the schools. We involve him in various activities, like speaking to our kids about issues or addressing specific concerns. We utilize whatever resources we have available to make things work.

Ms. Hill exemplified this approach by using available resources to support students and their families, involving other teachers, and even a local judge to address issues and concerns effectively.

Summary of Finding 3

Within this finding, the participants addressed the issue of teachers' lack of understanding concerning the racial discipline gap, pinpointing disparaging remarks that downplay the real experiences of racially diverse students as a significant cause. Craig Tetter highlighted troubling teacher statements like "I don't see color" or "I'm already doing enough for these kids," which often mask an inadequate grasp of racial issues. To

combat these views, Mr. Tetter encouraged teachers to reflect on their assumptions and consider whether they had fully explored all potential strategies for student engagement and support.

Kate Dart observed a pattern of indifference among staff, especially notable in cases where students attended school regularly but continued to struggle academically. This pattern suggests resistance among some teachers to adapt their teaching methods to better support students, particularly those experiencing trauma. Echoing Ms. Dart's observations, Viola Rowse expressed frustration with the resistance to change among some educators who preferred maintaining outdated practices. This resistance was often cloaked in confusion, which Ms. Rowse suspected might be feigned to avoid implementing necessary changes. Jackson Glisson also discussed the challenges of shifting entrenched mindsets shaped by tradition and outdated policies. He emphasized the need for educators to adjust their thinking to better align with contemporary educational needs and realities.

The narrative then transitioned into discussing strategies to engage teachers in closing the racial discipline gap. Emphasizing PD, book studies, and the use of data, participants like Craig Tetter advocated for starting with data to underscore their importance, thereby fostering a school environment that is receptive to equity and inclusive practices. Each participant's account illustrated a broader theme of resistance to change among teachers and highlighted efforts to promote understanding and adaptation in educational practices to address and close the racial discipline gap effectively.

Finding 4: APs Closing the Racial Discipline Gap

Finding 1 explored participants' personal definitions of social justice and the development of their social justice identities. In Finding 4, participants described how they put these identities into action, using them to drive change through purposeful strategies to close the racial discipline gap. Three themes emerged from this finding: APs' social justice identities as catalysts for change and the importance of building relationships. In this context, APs' commitment to social justice truly becomes actionable. As one participant, Jade Chambers, expressed, "For me, it's about taking action and being willing to have courageous conversations, taking a stance, and standing by what I say, even if it's unpopular." Finding 4 directly addressed RQ2 and aligns closely with key elements of the conceptual framework, particularly transformative leadership. It also resonates with three principles from Weick's organizational sensemaking—retrospective, social, and grounded in social justice identity.

APs' Social Justice Identity Drives Change

Closing gaps in education requires concrete action. In this theme, the participants discussed how their daily efforts contributed to closing the racial discipline gap. Craig Tetter believed the process begins with acknowledging the existence of systemic barriers, positioning himself as a catalyst for change. Mr. Tetter explained, "Recognizing that there are systemic barriers, and by acknowledging them, it empowers you to become a social justice leader." He elaborated:

> I think that I'm not only recognizing it, but being that catalyst for change, like, actually, I've been engaged in lead and equity dialogues to talk about the different topics, such as, you know, White supremacy or implicit bias. I think I'm at that stage where I'm able to kind of lead those discussions to discuss White privilege, for example, and how that shows up in schools.

Similarly, Israel Little expressed his frustration with systemic oppression, particularly toward low-income Black and Brown children. Mr. Little expressed:

> Because when I walk into these systems and spaces, I see oppressors looking to create more oppression and colonization of low socioeconomic Black and Brown children. Someone has to be willing to be that Nat Turner type in these spaces. I can't be the happy-go-lucky, compliant Black man in those rooms.

Mr. Little felt a responsibility to challenge and disrupt these oppressive systems, comparing his role to that of Nat Turner and emphasizing the need for resistance rather than compliance. His quote continued: "I feel like I have the credentials to back up anything I say in these spaces, and I'm going to disrupt them every time I think they're working against Black and Brown people." With confidence in his credentials, Mr. Little was determined to act by confronting and opposing any actions he believed were harmful to marginalized communities.

The next two participants spoke of transparency as an action they took to build relationships and trust with their school communities. Jackson Glisson emphasized the importance of flexibility, understanding, listening, and transparency when working with families. He believed in being honest and straightforward, even if families disagreed with a decision, as transparency fosters trust. Mr. Glisson stated,

> You have to be transparent. I say to everyone once, just tell me the truth, don't sugarcoat it, say what it is. I think when you're transparent with families, even if they disagree with the decision that was made, at least they understand that you listened to them and were honest.

Kay Holmes shared a similar sentiment, stating:

> Being transparent and honest, building relationships, and identifying areas where there are gaps in social justice are crucial. I'm willing to do the hard work and can get people on my team who I trust and who also do the work. I believe in not being afraid of who gets the credit. It's important to put your head down and get the job done. The most important thing is that the job gets done, not that your name is on it.

Ms. Holmes placed prominence on her 28 years of experience in education and highlighted the importance of transparency and honesty, which she believed overlapped significantly. She stressed the need for building relationships, identifying social justice gaps, and doing the hard work required to address those gaps.

The thoughts of Jake Tuttle and Bud Baker aligned as well on this topic. They both spoke about the importance of equity. Mr. Tuttle felt it was his mission to provide equitable experiences for his students. He focused on giving each child what they specifically needed rather than treating everyone equally. Mr. Tuttle added:

> It's my mission, I try my best to provide an equitable experience to all of our students. It's not about equality; it's about making sure that every child has what they need. In my current position, I can provide that type of intervention for my students. Our school is either at the bottom or second to the bottom in our district in terms of scores, so it's crucial to address these needs.

Bud Baker felt that not everyone, including educators, has a good working understanding of what equity truly means. He added that equity extends beyond race. Mr. Baker shared:

> That's something that we as a society, and even as educators, don't truly understand. We always hear the word equality, but where does equity truly fall in? I identify with the quality of truly understanding equity and bringing it to all. Equity doesn't just mean race; it can apply across the board. So, when I think of social justice, the quality I think about is equity.

Like Mr. Tuttle, Mr. Baker felt the action he took to assist with closing the racial discipline gap was understanding the difference between equality and equity and creating an equitable environment within his school.

Barclay Bond shared his own personal story and believed each individual has their own personal story to share and listening was a key action he used to drive change in his school. Mr. Bond shared:

> I identify that each of us has our own personal story, and we have to listen to and understand each person's situation. Decisions should be based on those stories, not just a set of rules or guidelines that have always been in place. Change is the

> first step in this process. Over the past 5 years, I've realized that education is about serving and assisting people, helping both adults and students reach their goals. Social justice isn't just about students; it's about everyone in the community and everyone associated with it.

Participants discussed in this theme the various actions APs take to help close the racial discipline gap. They emphasized the importance of recognizing systemic barriers and actively challenging oppressive practices. The APs also engaged in equity conversations, addressing issues such as White privilege and implicit bias to promote awareness and change within their schools.

Building Relationships

In this theme, the participants explored the strategies they used to address the racial discipline gap through building relationships. Clara Romero emphasized the importance of relationships, stating, "They are incredibly important to me, and I believe they are key to effective teaching." Reflecting on her experience, she referenced Rita Pearson's quote, "Kids don't work for people they don't like," which Ms. Romero felt strongly aligned with her own teaching philosophy. She added:

> I often remind my teachers that while they may not like every student, they must find at least one thing they respect or appreciate about each child in order to teach them effectively. Kids can sense when a teacher doesn't like them.

In a subsequent reflection, Ms. Romero emphasized that building relationships with both students and their families was crucial for effective behavior management and overall classroom management: "Building relationships with students and their families is essential. I'm a strong advocate for this because I believe relationships are the foundation of both behavior and classroom management. Kids know when they're not liked, and it affects them." Ms. Romero also shared an example of one of her teachers who appeared to dislike a student in her classroom, which she believed negatively affected that

student's behavior. She described, "I have a kindergarten student right now who knows their teacher doesn't like them and that breaks my heart because it stems from a behavior issue."

Like Ms. Romero, Morris Polk also believed building relationships to be crucial. He believed relationships prevent communication breakdowns, especially in the area of discipline. Mr. Polk shared:

> I believe building relationships with students is crucial. Often, disagreements stem from a breakdown in communication, so it's important to ensure expectations are clear and to elevate student voices by gathering their input to communicate effectively. The district's goal focuses on a progressive, restorative discipline approach, aiming to keep students in school rather than suspending them.

Mr. Polk valued gathering all the facts and listening carefully before making decisions, stressing that strong relationships are the key to effective student discipline.

According to the participants, relationship building is not only the key to effective school discipline, it supports academic success in the classroom, as noted by Craig Tetter. At the time of the interview, Mr. Tetter and his team were creating "look-fors" for teachers and administrators at his schools with the hope of promoting meaningful conversations among teachers about how to build relationships with students from diverse cultural backgrounds who may not look or speak like them. Mr. Tetter shared:

> Right now, we are unpacking those "look-fors" and facilitating dialogues in our schools to make teachers aware of them. This allows teachers to begin having meaningful conversations about how to build relationships with students who may not look or speak like them, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds.

Israel Little had a great deal to share on the topic of relationship building. His point of view was similar to what other participants had previously expressed, emphasizing the importance of building relationships. Mr. Little stated:

> I feel that teachers who have a good handle on classroom management and strong rapport with their students tend to experience fewer classroom issues compared to those who don't. When discussing behavior, it's essential to consider the antecedent, which is often the relationship between the teacher and the student, as well as the relationship between the student and the systems within the classroom.

Mr. Little's reflection highlights the importance of the teacher–student relationship and classroom systems as key factors in shaping student behavior. Though instructors play a critical role, Mr. Little pointed to the significant support provided by his school's climate team, which helped foster relationship building. The climate team worked closely with families and the community, playing a crucial role in strengthening these connections. Mr. Little continued:

> Instructors play a vital role—they are the front line of everything we do. However, the climate team, which engages with families and students outside of the classroom, also plays an important role in building relationships with parents and the community. It really does take a village to raise a child. All of this points to our school's culture, which is centered around relationship building, student-centered experiences, and instruction aligned with state core standards in ELA and math.

The school's culture was described as one that prioritized relationship building, student-centered experiences, and alignment with core academic standards. Mr. Little also addressed the consequences of inequitable decisions by teachers, which can damage trust and harm relationships with students. In his reflection, Mr. Little provided a tangible example of a teacher making an inequitable decision that went against the established school climate and culture:

> I recently had to address a situation where a teacher made an inequitable decision that went against our school's climate and culture. I explained the risks of deviating from established norms and treating some students differently. If students feel they're being treated unfairly, trust is lost, and the relationship between the teacher and the student is damaged.

In Mr. Little's concluding thought, he stated he believed that ultimately, building strong relationships and maintaining effective classroom management are crucial for minimizing behavioral issues. Mr. Little concluded:

> Ultimately, teachers who excel in managing their classrooms and building strong relationships with students encounter fewer issues. And when discussing behavior, it's important to recognize that the relationship between the teacher and student, along with the systems in place, is often the antecedent to that behavior.

Mr. Little's reflections underscore the idea that relationship building is not just a tool for managing behavior, but a core principle that defines the overall success of a classroom and school culture. By prioritizing equitable treatment and strong connections with students, teachers create an environment where trust and respect thrive. Mr. Little's insights demonstrate that fostering these relationships, along with maintaining effective classroom management, not only minimizes issues but also enhances the learning experience for all students. The collaboration among teachers, the climate team, and the community plays a pivotal role in shaping a supportive and inclusive environment that benefits both students and educators.

In this theme, the participants emphasized the vital role of strong relationships in reducing behavior issues and supporting student success. From Clara Romero's belief that relationships are foundational to effective teaching and behavior management, to Israel Little's focus on the importance of classroom management and rapport, it is clear that building trust with students is the key to fostering a positive school environment.

Student Advocacy

The next strategy the APs discussed was student advocacy. In this theme, the participants reflected on the need for teachers and staff to actively support and uplift students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. As relationships are built,

advocacy becomes the next step in ensuring students feel seen, heard, and treated equitably. Morris Polk stated, “I know that they need somebody that supports them and is pulling for them and is advocating for them and cheerleading them on and encouraging them.” In this theme, the participants discussed the ways in which they advocated for their students, not just within the classroom, but by addressing systemic challenges and barriers to equity. The first example of this was shared by Jessica Meyer, who believed “people shouldn’t feel marginalized or excluded. No one should walk away from any experience with me feeling diminished or unseen.” Her reflections continued:

> Advocacy . . . I think it’s because there are people, especially children, who need someone to speak up and be a voice for them. Not everyone has the exposure or experience to do that well. Someone has to be able to understand their world. We can’t be so . . . I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the saying, “Don’t be so heavenly bound, you’re no earthly good.” We have to meet people where they are, decipher what they’re experiencing, and ensure they get what they need.

Ms. Meyer stressed the importance of advocacy and belonging, particularly for children, who may need someone to speak up for them. She highlighted the need to understand others’ experiences and meet them where they are, ensuring they receive the support they need. As an SJL, Ms. Meyer identified most with advocacy and belonging, stressing that no one should feel marginalized, excluded, or unseen after an interaction with her. Kate Dart shared a similar sentiment as Ms. Meyer. She stated, “Every day I work with students, I see that they need someone who supports them, advocates for them, cheers them on, and encourages them. They give me the drive to continue the work.” Ms. Dart felt advocacy for her students drove her to continue doing this work. Jade Chambers’s advocacy took the form of having courageous conversations. Ms. Chambers expounded:

> For me, it’s about being willing to have courageous conversations, taking a stand, and standing by what I say, even if it’s unpopular. It means advocating for all groups. Sometimes, school leaders are quick to support racial groups but overlook others, not recognizing the commonalities and the importance of supporting them

> as well. We must address issues like sexual orientation and gender identity that students face. It doesn't have to be popular; you just have to do what's right.

Viola Rowse reflected on her own personal growth in the areas of student advocacy and leadership, noting she had become a better listener over the years, which she believed had aided her in becoming a better advocate for her students. Ms. Rowse shared:

> Speaking up for those who are unseen or unheard. In the last 5 or 6 years, I've become a much better listener because I used to be a more reactive leader. My current role requires a lot of listening and analyzing people, so that's what I focus on now. I'm strategic about what I say and how I advocate for the social justice needs of that population, those students, or myself. Being strategic, listening better, and understanding what the fight is and what the need is are crucial."

Ms. Rowse also emphasized the importance of APs being strategic in how they advocate for social justice, focusing on the specific needs of the population, students, or themselves. Listening carefully and understanding the issues at hand are essential to their approach.

Summary of Finding 4

In Finding 4, the participants explored the strategies they used to close the racial discipline gap, emphasizing the importance of putting their social justice identity into action. This finding highlighted the deliberate efforts the APs made to challenge systemic barriers, such as racial inequities, implicit bias, and White privilege, within their schools. Participants reflected on their roles as catalysts for change, advocating for marginalized students, and particularly those from low-income Black and Brown communities.

Key strategies included building strong, transparent relationships with students, families, and the community. The participants stressed that transparency, flexibility, and trust were vital in fostering supportive environments where all voices were heard. The APs also emphasized equity over equality, ensuring each student received individualized

support tailored to their specific needs. Participants felt this approach was crucial in schools facing performance challenges.

The importance of advocacy was a recurring theme, with participants discussing the need to advocate not only for racial groups but for all students, addressing issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and other marginalized identities. Courageous conversations and standing by one's beliefs, even when unpopular, were seen as essential to promoting equity and justice. Overall, APs play a crucial role in driving systemic change through relationship building, transparency, equity, and advocacy, ensuring all students feel seen and supported and are treated fairly.

Finding 5: Processing Discipline/Behavioral Referrals

Finding 5 addressed RQ3: How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools? To answer this question, the participants were first asked to share their experiences with processing school discipline or behavioral referrals. They were then asked to discuss the considerations made during the investigation process and in determining consequences for students who received such referrals. Central to this is the AP's decision-making process, which involves carefully evaluating multiple factors before reaching a resolution, understanding both the teacher's and the student's perspectives, considering the context of the incident, and assessing whether a restorative approach or exclusionary discipline is the best path forward. These considerations evolved into several themes, including the discipline/behavioral referral process, teacher referral considerations, student referral considerations, environmental/contextual factors, and determining the truth. The final theme focused on discerning the truth of the incident—how APs uncover the truth and the steps they take to get there. This finding is

closely linked to several tenets of the conceptual framework, particularly transformative and social justice leadership. Additionally, it intersects with four principles from Weick's organizational sensemaking: ongoing, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, social, and enactive of sensible environments.

The Discipline/Behavioral Referral Process

The first theme within this finding related to APs' perceptions of the discipline and referral process. When presented with a discipline or behavioral referral, most participants shared that they liked to hear both sides of the story. Kate Dart shared:

> The first thing I do when addressing a discipline issue is to listen to both sides of the story because there are always two sides and then the truth. Typically, I hear from the teacher first, then I call down the student to get their version. I brainstorm with the student on how things could have gone differently. Depending on whether this is a one-time issue or not, I always make sure to communicate with the parents—leaving a message, sending an email, or using the language line if needed.

When addressing discipline issues, Ms. Dart first listened to both sides of the story, starting with the teacher and then the student. She then brainstormed with the student about how the situation could have been handled differently. Depending on the severity or frequency of the issue, Ms. Dart always communicated with parents, whether by phone, email, or using the language line if necessary. She concluded her thoughts with her overall goal when processing a discipline referral:

> My goal is to find out what's going on and get their input. I ensure that any consequence assigned is appropriate for the infraction. Ultimately, I want students to walk away having learned a lesson, and ready to make better choices moving forward.

Ms. Dart felt involving parents was pivotal and always wanted to ensure the assigned consequence was appropriate. Ultimately, her aim was for students to learn from the

experience and make better choices in the future. The next participant tried to also gain perspectives from all parties involved. Craig Tetter shared:

> Often, students disagree with how the incident is written or perceived by the teacher. I listen to their viewpoint and, if necessary, provide guidance. For example, if a student talks back to a teacher and is removed from class, I discuss the situation with the student, helping them understand other ways to express their dissatisfaction. Many students feel disrespected or ignored, and their perspective can differ significantly from the teacher's. I use these moments as learning opportunities, sometimes assigning a consequence, but often just talking through the issue to help the student reflect on their behavior.

Like the previous reflection offered by Ms. Dart, Mr. Tetter took the opportunity and used it as a learning experience for the student, sometimes assigning a consequence but often engaging in discussion to help the student reflect on their behavior. Mr. Tetter's main focus was the student but he also used this opportunity as a learning experience for the teacher who wrote the referral. Mr. Tetter's thoughts continued:

> I also consider what the teacher might have done differently, but my focus is on helping the student reflect. I don't always immediately assign a consequence, as my discipline policy allows for resolving conflicts through conversation. If it's a student–teacher issue, I often hold a restorative conference with both parties, guiding them to work through their differences.

Mr. Tetter did not immediately jump to assigning a consequence, as his school district discipline policy allowed for resolving conflicts through restorative conversations. If it was a student–teacher issue, he often held a restorative conference with both parties, guiding them to work through their differences. The next participant took the same approach as Mr. Tetter, where he tried to have restorative conversations between the parties involved, whether the situation was a student–teacher or student–student issue. Jackson Glisson shared:

> It's so important for restorative conversations to take place between not only the individuals involved but also their families. The families need to understand what happened, why their child felt the need to act as they did, and why they made those choices. It's crucial that everyone recognizes that if we want things to

> change, we all have to do something different. Breaking down gaps is key—being transparent with families about the things we're working on as a school, whether it's supervision or issues on the bus, and offering strategies to help their child succeed in that environment.

Mr. Glisson asserted that to drive change, everyone needed to make adjustments. Mr. Glisson highlighted the need for transparency with families about school efforts, such as addressing supervision or bus issues, and providing strategies to help their child succeed in those environments. Breaking down gaps between school and families is crucial for fostering improvement. The final reflection for this section was from Israel Little. His first priority he felt was to the student. Mr. Little added:

> One of the first actions when dealing with a discipline issue is to remove the student from the spotlight, ensuring a private conversation to prevent the student from feeling the need to perform for others. They remain calm to avoid escalating the situation and then evaluate whether the issue is with the staff or the student. For example, if a student like Billy cuts class, they consider whether it was due to a lack of follow-up from staff or if Billy simply walked out without anyone noticing.

Mr. Little prioritized removing the student from the spotlight, ensuring private conversations to prevent any need for attention-seeking behavior. He maintained a calm demeanor to avoid escalating the situation and carefully assessed whether the issue stemmed from the student or a lapse in staff responsibility. For instance, in a case where Billy cut class, Mr. Little considered whether staff oversight, such as failing to provide or follow up on a hall pass, contributed to the problem, or if Billy left without anyone alerting staff. Mr. Little's thoughts continued:

> I look at how much responsibility falls on us as adults to manage systems better, and how much of it is the student having a tough day, needing support, or being held accountable. And, I consider if Billy is just refusing to go to class because he dislikes it, and how we can still wrap support around him. These are the things I think about when evaluating a disciplinary referral or when I step into a disciplinary situation.

Mr. Little evaluated how much responsibility lies with the adults in managing systems versus the student needing support or accountability. He considered whether the student's behavior, like refusing to attend class due to dislike, reflected a need for additional support. These factors guided his approach when handling disciplinary referrals or situations.

Teacher Referral Considerations

This section focuses on the role of the teacher in the discipline and behavioral referral process. The goal was to explore the factors APs consider when reviewing a referral and how these considerations influence their decisions. As Andrea Blake explained, "One factor I consider is the teacher's track record." Ms. Blake first assessed whether the teacher consistently provided reliable information:

> If a teacher frequently provides information that doesn't pan out. I take that into account. I also look at how they interact with students in the classroom. Are they sending the same student for the same behavior, or for different behaviors?

She shared an example of a teacher who regularly sent the same student to her office for minor issues. In these cases, she adopted a coaching approach, guiding the teacher to address concerns directly with the student instead of immediately resorting to administrative intervention. She recognized that, at times, the issue was more about the teacher's frustration than the student's actions.

> For example, I have a teacher who often complains about one particular student, sending them to me for every minor issue. In those cases, I have to guide the teacher and say, 'This one is on you; you need to talk with the student.' I walk them through it because, sometimes, it's more about the teacher's frustration than the student's behavior.

This approach highlights the importance of self-reflection in classroom management, encouraging teachers to assess their responses before escalating disciplinary concerns. By fostering direct teacher-student engagement, Ms. Blake helped build stronger

relationships and improve overall classroom dynamics. She contrasted this with teachers who take a more proactive approach before seeking administrative support.

> On the other hand, I have teachers who consistently try everything they can before coming to me. When they do reach out, it's because they've exhausted all options and truly need help. I tend to listen more closely to those teachers, as they aren't just sending random students. This plays a big role in how I approach each situation.

This distinction influences Ms. Blake's decision making, ensuring disciplinary actions are fair and that teachers receive appropriate guidance and support based on their approach to student behavior. By considering a teacher's track record and intervention efforts, she tailors her response to create a more balanced and effective disciplinary process.

Viola Rowse similarly took into consideration the referring teacher's track record but also looked into the identity of the teacher. Ms. Rowse explained:

> Well, because we're human, I immediately think about who the teacher is, what they teach, and their personality. Are they someone who frequently sends students to me, or are they a teacher who usually handles things in their own classroom? If it's a teacher who typically manages everything themselves, I know the referral is probably serious. But if it's someone who constantly sends students, I realize they might just be at their wit's end and need more support.

"I also consider how many referrals that teacher has made in a day or week, their background, whether they are a new or veteran teacher, and if they're new to the profession or the school. It all makes a difference." Ms. Rowse reflected on various factors that she considered when handling teacher referrals, such as the frequency of referrals, the teacher's experience, and whether they were new to the profession or the school. She acknowledged that these elements influenced her approach and decision-making process. The next participant, Mr. Polk, shared his approach when handling discipline referrals written by teachers:

> I consider how many referrals the teacher has given and their teaching practices. I try to do walkthroughs almost every day. I understand that we have some

> challenging students, but I also look at whether the same student is being referred repeatedly and what strategies have been put in place. I also take into account whether the teacher is new or a veteran, and if the teacher is just having a bad day. Instead of sending an email, I prefer to walk over and have a conversation, ask them to explain what happened, and then decide if a coaching conversation is needed or if the situation warrants a specific response.

included considering factors such as the number of referrals, teaching practices, and whether the same student was being repeatedly referred. He prioritized daily classroom walkthroughs and considered whether the teacher was new, experienced, or simply having a bad day. Rather than sending emails, Mr. Morris preferred in-person conversations to understand what happened, determine whether coaching was necessary, and decide whether the situation required a particular response.

Student Referral Considerations

The previous section explored APs' perspectives on teacher referral considerations. In this section, the APs were asked to share their views on the factors they considered when processing a discipline or behavioral referral for students. Jackson Glisson believed "some of our students struggle with different issues, which could be related to medication or gaps in communication or understanding expectations." Mr. Glisson emphasized the importance of speaking with both students and their families to gain a better understanding of the student and determine what considerations needed to be made. Mr. Glisson's quote continued:

> It's important that we have conversations with both the students and their families to ensure they understand the expectations in the classroom. It's also crucial for the teacher to hear the family's perspective. To me, it's about building a relationship. Are we seeing the same behaviors at home, and if so, what can we do together to identify what has worked and what hasn't? If it's not happening at home, what strategies do you use to keep your child focused or behaving in line with your expectations?

Mr. Glisson highlighted the significance of open lines of communication with both students and their families to gain a comprehensive understanding of students, especially for those with a history of receiving discipline referrals. He believed hearing the family's perspective was crucial for building strong relationships and determining whether similar behaviors occurred at home. This approach helped identify effective strategies and informed the considerations needed to best support the student when processing a discipline/behavioral referral. Manfred Perkins also took into consideration the backgrounds of the students with whom he worked:

> Well, as I've said, I know all of our students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, so I try to consider what kind of day a student might be having. What did they deal with this morning? Did they have breakfast? I see some kids wearing the same clothes every day. Did they get a good night's sleep? I take all of this into account when trying to understand why they're acting the way they are. I'll ask them, "How is your day going?"

Mr. Perkins acknowledged that he took into consideration where students come from; with the understanding that many of his students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. He considered factors like whether they had breakfast, slept well, or were wearing the same clothes daily. These factors helped Mr. Perkins understand a student's behavior, and he often asked students about their day to gain insight into their challenges:

> And some will say, "Mr. Perkins, I had to work all night, I couldn't sleep, and I got in trouble for having my head down in class." There are just certain things you have to consider with these kids because you don't know their full story—what happened last night or what they didn't get this morning on their way to school. You have to take all of this into account when dealing with a student who's been sent to you.

Mr. Perkins ended his reflection by sharing that some students shared personal struggles, such as having to work all night and being too tired to focus in class. He stressed the importance of considering each student's full story, including what they may have experienced the previous night or missed in the morning. Understanding these factors is

essential when addressing a behavior, as there may be underlying challenges affecting the student's actions. In the same vein, Viola Rowse shared her beliefs on this subject:

> When considering a situation, I think about how many times the student has been referred—whether it's for the week or the entire school year. I also consider my relationship with their parents. Have I met or spoken with them before? Do they have negative feelings towards me, maybe because I previously suspended this child or another one of their children?

Just as teachers, students have track records as well. Ms. Rowse reflected on several factors when addressing a student's situation, including the frequency of referrals, either over the week or the school year. She also considered her relationship with the student's parents, questioning whether they had interacted before and if any negative feelings existed, possibly due to past disciplinary actions such as suspending the child or a sibling. Her reflection continued:

> I also look at how the student is doing academically. Have they been absent a lot? Are they returning after a holiday and trying to catch up on missed work? Are they feeling frustrated about making up that work? I even consider basic needs—did they eat today? Do they need a snack? I'll offer them something to eat and then ask them to explain what happened.

Ms. Rowse made considerations if the student was a parent or pregnant. "I consider their personal circumstances. I consider if they were a parent or pregnant. These are some of the factors I weigh when handling these situations." These were some of the factors she took into consideration when processing a discipline referral.

Environmental/Contextual Factors

In this next theme, the participants explored how students' environmental or contextual factors influenced their decision-making process while processing a discipline/behavioral referral. Israel Little brought light to a phenomenon that had affected his school community. Mr. Little shared:

> As far as the environment students are coming from, I've mentioned it several times during this interview—we have to be culturally aware of where our students are from and what gangs they may be affiliated with. Our deans and staff even pay attention to drill rap in the city because several of our students have been victims mentioned in these songs. While drill rap is popular across the country, it's important to remember that the students being referenced are real people, often found dead in tragic situations.

This reflection stresses the importance of being culturally aware of students' backgrounds, including any gang affiliations. Mr. Little noted that school staff paid attention to local drill rap, as some students had been victims mentioned in the songs. Mr. Little gave the following definition for drill rap:

> Drill rap, spelled D-R-I-L-L, refers to music videos or rap songs where opposing gangs boast about shooting their rivals. It originated in Chicago with artists like Chief Keef in 2012, and while it started there, cities like Philadelphia have now become a significant part of the scene.

Though drill rap is popular nationwide, Mr. Little highlighted that the students referenced in these songs were real people, often involved in tragic circumstances. This awareness is essential for understanding students' home environments. When speaking about environments, Andrea Blake said she took into consideration the home environments of students and what messaging students were receiving from home. Ms. Blake shared:

> Yes, we do take that into consideration because, as I mentioned, many kids repeat things they hear from their family or friends, like, "My mom says it to my aunt," or "My cousins and I say it to each other all the time." I understand that every family is different and has their own ways of communicating, but a threat is still a threat. Whether it's a credible or non-credible threat will affect how we handle the discipline.

Ms. Blake felt children often repeated things they had heard from family or friends, such as phrases used casually within their households, and in their homes these phrases were deemed appropriate, but when these phrases were used in school they could be considered a threat. She admitted that though she recognized that each family has its own

communication style, a threat was still considered a threat. The credibility of the threat, whether serious or not, influenced the disciplinary actions taken.

Like the two previous participants, Craig Tetter shared similar sentiments. He said he did take into consideration students' backgrounds and often consulted with other staff members. He shared:

> Yes, I do, and there are many times I consult with other staff members, such as the dean, our student support advisor, or the student's counselor, to learn more about the student or any factors that may have influenced their behavior. I take these considerations into account depending on the infraction. For more serious infractions, I may still assign a consequence, but I'll also call the parent to learn more about the student's environment and determine if they need any additional support.

Mr. Tetter believed that consulting with the student's counselor to gain more insight into a student's behavior was beneficial. He considered these factors when addressing infractions. For more serious incidents, Mr. Tetter would still impose consequences but would also contact the parent to learn more about the student's home environment and assess whether additional support was needed.

Determining the Truth

In this last theme, the participants shared the measures they took to determine the truth when processing a discipline/behavioral referral. Jake Tuttle believed in staying open to all perspectives, especially in situations where Black students were disciplined more frequently than others. Mr. Tuttle shared:

> My experience and exposure have taught me to be open to all sides, and I try my best to maintain that. I know this isn't always something teachers like, but we're in an environment where our Black students are disciplined more frequently than their peers. So, I have to make sure I remain aware of that, and model what it looks like to respond appropriately.

Mr. Tuttle acknowledged that there was an imbalance and strove to remain aware of it, modeling appropriate and fair responses to ensure equitable treatment. Mr. Tuttle's thoughts continued:

> Even with my principal, we have frequent conversations about how we handle situations differently. For example, in a particular situation, she might react by yelling at students because that's her style, whereas I approach it as a "quiet storm," handling things more calmly. She often wants me to come down harder, but that's something I'm learning to navigate, especially since it's a different dynamic from what I've had before.

Mr. Tuttle described frequent discussions with his principal about their differing disciplinary approaches. The principal tended to raise her voice when addressing students, whereas Mr. Tuttle preferred a calm, measured response, described as a "quiet storm." Though the principal often encouraged a stricter approach, Mr. Tuttle was learning to navigate this difference, as it was a new dynamic. As his reflection continued, Mr. Tuttle said he "tries to take the time to fully understand the situation, the behavior, and the type of student being disciplined. I work hard to ensure that everything aligns and that we're addressing issues fairly and effectively." Mr. Tuttle made a commitment to taking the time to fully understand each situation, the behavior involved, and the type of student being disciplined. He strove to ensure all factors were considered to address issues fairly and effectively. Mr. Tuttle felt that as a Black male in schools, he personally understood how discipline could sometimes be used in ways that undermined a student's ability to tell the truth. Mr. Tuttle added:

> As a Black male in schools, I understand how discipline can sometimes be used in ways that undermine a student's ability to tell the truth. I've experienced situations where teachers exaggerated events, and in my time, that often led to punishment, like paddling, even when I hadn't done what was claimed. But because the teacher said it, it was automatically believed to be true.

He concluded his reflection with this last thought: “Because of those experiences, I make it a point to assess each situation carefully, understanding that as adults, we’re not always right. Sometimes our emotions can cloud our judgment, especially when dealing with children.” His experiences placed him in the best position to advocate for students who looked like him.

Clara Romero, on the other hand, used a different tool to assist her with determining the truth. She relied on cameras. Ms. Romero shared:

> Cameras are my first line of defense when I can use them. If a teacher witnessed what happened, that helps, but I have to be cautious. They can easily see physical actions, but speech or more subtle interactions require more digging. I typically interview students who were nearby when the incident occurred, and I always do it independently, never in a group. By interviewing them one-on-one, I can usually connect the dots. There’s often a common thread in their stories that helps me get to the truth.

Ms. Romero felt her methods led to almost 100% accuracy. She concluded, “As for accuracy, I’d say I’m pretty accurate—about 99% of the time.” Bud Baker also relied on cameras to assist him with determining the truth:

> I try to interview as many people as possible. I try to go from student, I usually start with a student to get their perspective. I never start with the teacher. I work my way from student to safety member, to teacher aid, to other students and then finally the teacher because obviously the teacher is an authoritative presence in the classroom and they’re gonna be the end all be all in their classroom. Truth is in the eye of the beholder. I do believe it. And everybody’s truth looks different.

Mr. Baker’s approach to investigating incidents involved prioritizing interviews with students first, rather than starting with the teacher. He worked through a process, speaking with students, safety members, teacher aides, and other students before finally consulting the teacher. Mr. Baker acknowledged that each person’s perspective may differ, emphasizing that “truth is in the eye of the beholder,” as everyone’s version of events can vary. His thoughts continued:

> But you're never gonna get the whole truth. It's not gonna happen because everybody's view or perception of a situation is gonna be biased regardless of who the hell you are. White, Black, rich, poor, everybody's truth is gonna be different. An incident may occur and you can investigate it for 5 days and you're still not gonna get exactly what happened. Unfortunately, sometimes I do have to rely on video. And I have fired people in regards to video because unfortunately video does not lie.

Like Ms. Romero, Mr. Baker asserted that it was impossible to get the complete truth in any situation because everyone's perception is biased, regardless of their background. Even after thorough investigation, the exact events may remain unclear. As a result, Mr. Baker sometimes relied on video evidence, which was seen as unbiased, and had made decisions, including firing staff, based on video footage, as it provided a more reliable account of what happened. This tangible evidence assisted in the decision-making process when processing a discipline/behavioral referral.

Andrea Blake tied this part of her job to the work of an SJL. Ms. Blake stated, "Being a social justice leader means making sure we are equitable to all students. This involves ensuring every student has the opportunity to share their side of what happened and considering all accounts before making any decisions." Ms. Blake involved the student to ensure every student had the opportunity to share their side of what happened and considered all accounts before making any decisions. She did not only rely on the teacher's account of the incidents. Ms. Blake shared, "It's not just about taking the teacher's word and blaming the student who seems to fit the description. I make sure to hear their side of the story." Ms. Blake's thoughts continued:

> If there's camera footage, I always check it. I ask all the people involved. Any issue usually takes me 30 minutes to an hour to investigate thoroughly because I never want a child to feel like their voice is not heard. It's really important to me to be fair in my consequences, making sure I hear all sides of the story and have all the information.

Ms. Blake took her time when processing a discipline/behavioral referral. She believed in conducting thorough investigations, always reviewing camera footage and interviewing everyone involved. She dedicated 30 minutes to an hour to each issue to ensure fairness and give every child a chance to be heard. Ms. Blake valued making informed, balanced decisions by gathering all sides of the story before determining consequences.

Discipline as a Growth Opportunity Rather Than Punishment

Reframing Punitive Practices. The APs emphasized reframing traditional punitive discipline practices into opportunities for student learning and development. Participants highlighted courageous conversations, a key practical component, involving direct engagement with students to explore underlying reasons for their behavior, promote reflection on the impacts of their actions, and collaboratively develop constructive pathways forward. This aligns with restorative justice principles, focusing on reconciliation, understanding, and growth.

Israel Little underscored this approach, stating, “I prioritize removing the student from the spotlight and ensuring private conversations that allow for genuine reflection and growth, not public shaming.” Similarly, Jackson Glisson emphasized, “Restorative conversations with students and their families are crucial. They help everyone involved understand what happened and why, turning discipline into a meaningful learning experience.”

Challenges and Limitations. Despite their commitment, APs acknowledged limitations in implementing growth-oriented discipline. Constraints of their roles and contextual school factors posed significant barriers. Viola Rowse expressed, “The school setting, including resistance from staff who favor traditional discipline methods, can limit

our ability to fully implement restorative practices." Kay Holmes further reflected on systemic limitations, explaining, "District policies and resource constraints can hinder our capacity to provide consistent follow-up, limiting the potential impact of these growth-oriented disciplinary interventions."

Actions Toward Social Justice Leadership. To bridge theory and practice effectively, APs proactively engaged in specific measures:

- Facilitating equity-focused PD for staff on implicit bias, culturally responsive practices, and restorative justice methods.
- Conducting regular equity audits to track discipline disparities, fostering data-driven systemic change.
- Advocating for policy revisions at district levels to support restorative and equitable disciplinary approaches.
- Creating structured opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on disciplinary practices through facilitated book studies and professional learning communities.
- Building and nurturing relationships with students and families through consistent communication, fostering trust, and ensuring transparent disciplinary procedures.

These actions illustrate the APs' active role as social justice leaders, translating theoretical frameworks into tangible outcomes. Their culturally responsive, equity-driven practices demonstrate a commitment to transforming the discipline process, addressing systemic barriers, and cultivating inclusive school cultures. The APs actively champion reframing discipline from punitive to growth-oriented practices, emphasizing courageous

conversations and restorative justice. They remain aware of limitations and continue advocating for structural support and policies aligned with social justice principles to achieve equitable discipline reforms.

Summary of Finding 5

Finding 5 underscores the complexities of school discipline and highlights APs' critical role in fostering equitable, restorative, and growth-oriented approaches. APs emphasized reframing discipline from punitive actions toward meaningful opportunities for student development through RP and courageous conversations. Their decision-making processes reflect social justice leadership by emphasizing fairness, cultural responsiveness, and engaging students directly to understand behaviors and collaboratively seek constructive outcomes. The APs also identified role-specific constraints and contextual challenges within school environments, such as staff resistance and systemic policy limitations, which can hinder the implementation and effectiveness of these growth-focused disciplinary interventions. Moving forward, school district leaders should integrate equity-centered discipline training into AP leadership development programs, including professional learning on RP, implicit bias, courageous conversations, and trauma-informed discipline. Additionally, district leaders should implement formalized discipline equity audits to track patterns of disproportionate discipline, address systemic biases, and provide structural support to fully realize equitable discipline reforms. Transparency in discipline data can further help school leaders proactively adjust policies and interventions, sustaining environments conducive to both student accountability and growth.

Finding 6: Factors That Influence the Discipline Process

There are several factors that influence APs' decision-making process when determining disciplinary outcomes for students. The two most prominent factors the participants identified as shaping their decisions were student relational factors and district policy. In this study, relational factors referred to the relationship between APs and students, and whether or how this relationship may affect the type of discipline administered. The second factor was how district behavior policies may influence an AP's decision-making process. This finding addressed RQ3's only subquestion: What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process? This finding is closely linked to several tenets of the conceptual framework, particularly transformative and social justice leadership. Additionally, it intersects with four principles from Weick's organizational sensemaking: ongoing, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, social, and enactive of sensible environments.

Relational Factors

The first theme within Finding 6 was how relational factors influenced the APs' decision-making process. Andrea Blake shared that she "considers it in terms of not changing the consequence itself—the consequence remains the same, whether it's a student who is new to my office or one I've been seeing for months. The approach, however, is what changes." Ms. Blake believed that though the consequences for a student's behavior remained the same regardless of whether the student was new or familiar to them, her approach to handling the situation differed. Ms. Blake's thoughts continued:

> For a student I'm just getting to know, the conversation would be different from one I've been having with a student for months. With the latter, the conversation

> might focus on how what we're doing isn't working because they keep ending up in my office, and we'd talk about what changes we need to make moving forward. For a new student, I'd focus on getting to know them—asking what motivates them, what they enjoy about school, and so on. So, while the consequence stays the same, my approach and the way we discuss the path forward differs.

Ms. Blake's thoughts addressed her approach for both the student with whom she was familiar and the student she did not quite know. Despite these relational factors, she believed the disciplinary outcome was consistent and the way she engaged with the student varied based on their relationship and history. The next participant would agree with Ms. Blake. Craig Tetter stated, "It's difficult, but these decisions are necessary because I have to consider the safety and well-being of the other students, ensuring they have a comfortable and conducive learning environment." Mr. Tetter's thoughts continued:

> I try to find and consider other resources that can support the student. Sometimes, I get overly invested in certain students because I want them to succeed. So, if I have to make the tough decision to remove them from the classroom, it's because of their behavior. However, whether they're away or upon their return, I make sure to check in with them and involve others who also want to support their success.

Mr. Tetter had made such a strong commitment to student success that he sometimes became deeply invested in helping those students with whom he had the opportunity to build strong relationships. When making difficult decisions, like removing a student from the classroom, was necessary due to behavior, Mr. Tetter ensured continued support through check-ins and by involving others. Despite the challenge, Mr. Tetter highlighted the importance of balancing individual student needs with the responsibility of maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment for all students. In the next reflection, Kay Holmes gave an example of a student with whom she invested a great deal of time to build a relationship. Ms. Holmes shared:

> Yes, the young man I mentioned earlier, who was constantly getting into fights or trying to sneak attack others, is someone I felt very invested in. He started off in my office refusing to cooperate, saying things like, "I don't have to tell you my name," or, "How do you not know my name? I'll just give you my initials." He resisted me at every step in the beginning. Over time, we developed a strong relationship, where he became vulnerable in our conversations. But despite that, his behavior wasn't changing.

Ms. Holmes shared her experience with this challenging student who often engaged in aggressive behavior, such as fighting and sneak attacks. Initially, the student resisted building a relationship, but over time, Ms. Holmes and the student developed a strong bond, though the student's behavior remained unchanged. Ms. Holmes's reflection continued:

> I always try to use as much flexibility as I can in discipline to keep a student in school and help them access programs that might teach them the skills they need to succeed. But there are times when a student creates an unsafe environment for others. In those cases, it becomes a heartbreaking decision, but not a difficult one.

Ms. Holmes tried to use flexibility in disciplinary actions, aiming to keep students in school and helping them access resources for personal growth. However, when a student's actions created an unsafe environment, APs must make the difficult decision to remove them for the safety of others. Though these decisions are emotionally difficult, they are necessary for the well-being of all students, and Ms. Holmes treated each child as if they were her own.

District Policy

The next factor that surfaced under this theme was district policy. Participants shared how policy influenced their decision-making process when determining student outcomes. Jackson Glisson was very expressive about his thoughts on district policy. He shared,

> You know, policy is policy. So we have to adhere to policy. But again, you're building those relationships, you're building on the support that the students and families need. So that's always at the forefront of any decision that you make.

Mr. Glisson felt the cornerstone of supporting students began with relationship building. In the same light, Mr. Little said he was "looking at it from a social justice perspective, as well as considering what's in the best interest of both the school and the student. Continually suspending a student for the same infraction doesn't benefit anyone." Similarly, Melinda Plaza believed that she needed to "aim" to do what was best for students. She stated,

> While we do have to follow a code of behavior, we aim to do what we think is best for our kids within the school. We try not to stray too far from the code, but there's a lot of gray area where we can make decisions based on what we feel is best for the students we serve.

The next participant, Morris Polk, shared his thoughts on district policy. Mr. Polk highlighted the need to revise certain policies and procedures, particularly in addressing biases and inequities affecting specific student subgroups. Mr. Polk shared:

> I think that there's some policies and procedures that need to be shifted. I think that, like I said earlier, the expectations and bias for particular subgroups of students is unacceptable. Even with I think there's some I've read some studies about like middle school Black female students who are disciplined at a higher rate than their White female students like that's an issue. And so I think we know that's an issue, but again going back to the action part, what are we going to do about it, and so And so I think that comes from.

Mr. Polk pointed to a study that centered on Black female middle school students being disciplined at disproportionately higher rates than their White peers, which is a recognized issue. Mr. Polk made a call for action and highlighted the importance of transitioning from merely acknowledging the problem to taking concrete action to address this important issue.

In the next reflection, Kate Dart shared her thoughts on when she believed a policy was unreasonable. She made the choice to take action with inaction:

> I have some concerns regarding the enforcement of the hood rule. At the beginning of the year, we were telling kids to take off their hoods, and the ones most impacted were Black and Brown boys. I chose not to address the hood issue because I was just happy they were just coming to school.

Ms. Dart expressed concerns about enforcing her district's hood policy, noting it disproportionately affected Black and Brown boys. She highlighted that focusing on hoods created negative interactions with students, especially right as they entered the building in the morning, potentially adding to the trauma some students already experienced at school. Ms. Dart's thoughts continued:

> We must recognize that, for some students, school itself can be a source of trauma. Enforcing policies without considering their circumstances only adds to their stress. Maybe that gray sweatshirt is their only shirt, or they're wearing a hood because they didn't get a haircut. Instead of fixating on "Take off your hood," let's focus on what matters—getting them to class on time. I'm just glad they're here.

Ms. Dart understood the personal reasons students might wear hoods, such as experiencing a tough day or not being able to afford a haircut. She advocated for focusing on positive engagement and making students feel welcome, rather than strictly enforcing minor dress code violations. Similar to Israel Little, she had adopted a social justice perspective when addressing student outcomes related to these policies. Kay Holmes shared that she "struggles with policies that are comprehensive and designed for a county with over 25 high schools. These blanket policies don't fit every school." As Ms. Holmes's reflection continued, she provided an example of how exclusionary practices limited opportunities for students:

> A clear example of injustice is the limited opportunities for students with exclusionary discipline records. If a student is administratively placed at another school, they are barred from vocational courses and academy programs. This

> means struggling students, already removed from traditional settings, are further restricted from becoming electricians, studying HVAC, or nursing. That's a barrier I'm fighting—this policy simply doesn't make sense.

Ms. Holmes passionately expressed her frustration with comprehensive, blanket policies that did not suit the unique needs of all schools and the diverse needs of students within those schools. She highlighted a specific policy that restricted students with exclusionary discipline records from participating in vocational courses, which she viewed as a social injustice. These students, already struggling, were further limited in their opportunities to pursue practical careers like becoming electricians or studying nursing. Ms. Holmes was actively fighting against such policies, along with addressing socioeconomic struggles in the community.

Craig Tetter had a different perspective on policy, as he shared that he "interprets it [policy] as it is, it is written. As it states what the specific violations are based on the codes, and what the parameters are in terms of what should be assigned based on the violations." Mr. Tetter explained that he interpreted the discipline policy strictly as written, following specific codes and guidelines without room for personal interpretation. He continued:

> For instance, if a student has cut class five times, that's considered a level one infraction. If I've already met with the student twice and [been] assigned in-school suspension, then by the third time, I would need to involve the parent. My goal is to ensure that each step is followed correctly, addressing the behavior progressively while providing the necessary support for the student to improve.

Once an infraction was identified, Mr. Tetter assigned consequences based on the progressive discipline policy. For example, if a student cut class multiple times, Mr. Tetter progressively escalated the response—from meetings and suspensions to involving parents—while ensuring the student received support to improve their behavior.

Summary of Finding 6

In conclusion, finding 6 revealed that the discipline decision-making process among APs was influenced by various factors, with student relationships and district policy being the most impactful. APs such as Mr. Glisson, Mr. Little, and Ms. Plaza illustrated that by building strong connections with students, they could tailor disciplinary actions to support students' well-being while remaining compliant with policy. Their focus on social justice, flexibility, and attention to students' personal and social contexts highlighted their commitment to promoting equity and positive outcomes. Other participants, like Mr. Polk and Ms. Dart, critiqued district policies that disproportionately affected marginalized students, particularly Black female students and students of color. Their focus on addressing bias and limiting punitive measures that may further alienate students aligned with social justice leadership principles, which emphasize fairness and inclusivity. Ms. Dart's approach, for example, focused on reducing harm by avoiding the enforcement of minor policies, like the hood rule, which she believed disproportionately targeted Black and Brown boys.

On the other hand, APs like Mr. Tetter followed district policies strictly, adhering to progressive discipline models while ensuring students received the necessary support to improve their behavior. His method highlighted a more rigid interpretation of policy but still maintained a focus on helping students learn from their experiences. Ultimately, APs play a pivotal role in navigating the balance between upholding district policy and fostering a supportive, equitable environment for all students. Whether through relationship building, RP, or social justice-focused critiques of existing policies, these leaders were actively shaping a fairer, more inclusive school environment. Their

thoughtful approaches underscore the importance of addressing systemic inequities and tailoring disciplinary responses to support both individual student growth and community well-being.

Chapter Summary

The focus in this study was on how APs understood and navigated the discipline process to support the needs of all students, specifically working to close the racial discipline gap in exclusionary discipline practices. Key findings included the development of APs' social justice identities; their views on factors contributing to the racial discipline gap; challenges posed by teachers in addressing this gap; actions and strategies APs used to reduce the racial discipline gap; considerations in handling discipline and behavioral referrals; and other factors influencing the discipline process. Each finding included two to four emergent themes.

The first research question examined how APs developed their social justice identities, with the initial finding highlighting this process through three emergent themes. Among the 20 participants, 14 attributed their growth as SJLs to personal experiences or "personal encounters," whereas four cited professional experiences, such as "observing injustices faced by others," as pivotal in shaping their identities. In this section, I presented the three themes on social justice identity development: APs' definitions of social justice, lived experiences, and professional experiences. These themes revealed how APs define and nurture their social justice identities, fueling their commitment to addressing the racial discipline gap. APs described social justice leadership as embodying courage, advocacy, and a readiness to disrupt unjust systems, seeing themselves as "warriors" who actively reform policies to support marginalized

students. Their personal reflections, including experiences as members of marginalized communities or encounters with the school-to-prison pipeline, deepened their understanding and commitment to equity.

The second finding focused on the perspectives of APs regarding the contributing factors to the racial discipline gap. This finding addressed RQ2 as the participants shared their attitudes, beliefs, and practices concerning disciplinary measures and how they may affect marginalized students. From this finding, three themes emerged: structural inequities, implicit bias, and deficiency in cultural competence. These brought forth participants' viewpoints on the root causes, awareness of the complexities surrounding discipline in education, and provided insight into addressing and mitigating the racial discipline gap within school settings. The insights provided by the participants underscored the urgent need for addressing systemic biases, rectifying inequitable practices, and promoting cultural competence within educational institutions. By raising awareness of these issues and advocating for transformative and socially just leadership, steps can be taken to mitigate the racial discipline gap and create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

The next finding highlighted teachers and the racial discipline gap and addressed RQ2 and its subquestion. Most participants expressed that one of the most prevalent barriers to closing the racial discipline gap stemmed from the teacher. From this finding, three themes emerged: teachers' lack of understanding of the racial discipline gap, engaging teachers to advance the closing of the racial discipline gap, and contending with the challenges stemming from teachers' limited understanding of the racial discipline gap. This was often expressed through dismissive remarks that downplay students'

diverse experiences. This lack of awareness, coupled with some educators' resistance to adapting teaching methods, particularly for students experiencing trauma, was seen as a barrier to equitable discipline practices. To address this, participants advocated for PD, book studies, and data-driven discussions to encourage teachers to reconsider assumptions and adopt more inclusive strategies. Overall, the finding underscored both the resistance to change and the concerted efforts to foster a school culture focused on equity and closing the racial discipline gap.

In Finding 4, participants described how they activated their social justice identities to drive change through targeted strategies aimed at closing the racial discipline gap. Finding 4 answered RQ3's subquestion and in this finding three main themes emerged: APs' social justice identities as catalysts for change, building relationships, and student advocacy. APs committed to challenging systemic barriers, such as racial inequities, implicit bias, and White privilege, while advocating especially for students from low-income Black and Brown communities. Key strategies included establishing transparent, trust-based relationships with students, families, and the community, and prioritizing equity over equality to provide individualized support for students' unique needs. Advocacy emerged as central, with APs stressing the importance of championing marginalized identities, including those related to race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Through courage, transparency, and a commitment to equitable support, APs work to foster inclusive environments where all students are valued and treated fairly.

In response to RQ3, Finding 5 explored APs' decision-making processes in handling behavioral discipline referrals. This process involved carefully evaluating multiple factors; considering both teacher and student perspectives, the context of

incidents, and whether a restorative or exclusionary approach was most appropriate. Key themes emerged: referral considerations for teachers and students; contextual influences; and uncovering the truth of each incident. Finding 5 underscored the complexity of APs' roles in balancing accountability with empathy, while using discipline as a growth opportunity rather than punishment. APs focused on RP, often engaging students, teachers, and families to repair relationships and strengthen the school community. Cultural awareness enabled the APs to make context-sensitive decisions, accounting for factors like gang affiliations or communication styles. Thorough investigations, using interviews and video evidence, ensured fairness and reduced biases. In embodying social justice leadership, APs prioritized fairness, empathy, and transparency, fostering an inclusive school culture that valued equity, restoration, and student growth.

The final finding examined the factors influencing APs' decision making in determining disciplinary outcomes, with student relationships and district policy emerging as the most significant. Relational factors referred to how APs' connections with students affected their disciplinary choices, and district behavior policies shaped decisions to varying extents. This finding addressed the subquestion of RQ3, exploring influences on APs' sensemaking of the discipline process. APs demonstrated diverse approaches: some tailored actions to support students' well-being while complying with policy, emphasizing social justice, flexibility, and attention to individual contexts to promote equity. Others critiqued district policies that disproportionately affected marginalized students, particularly students of color—for instance, avoiding minor policy enforcement aimed to reduce harm and prevent further alienation. Alternatively, some APs adhered strictly to progressive discipline models, balancing policy adherence with

student support to encourage behavioral growth. Ultimately, APs navigated the balance between upholding district policy and fostering equitable environments, using strategies like relationship building, RP, and policy critique. Their thoughtful approaches highlighted the importance of addressing systemic inequities, supporting student growth, and shaping a more inclusive school culture.

This chapter provided a comprehensive analysis of APs' experiences and perceptions regarding the discipline process in urban Title I K-12 schools, emphasizing their efforts to close the racial discipline gap. Through the findings, APs were shown to actively develop their social justice identities, challenge systemic inequities, and advocate for marginalized students. Key insights addressed how APs identified factors contributing to the racial discipline gap, the role teachers played in both advancing and hindering equity, and specific actions APs employed to build supportive, inclusive school cultures.

Central to this process was the complex decision making APs undertook when handling disciplinary cases. Their approach demonstrated a commitment to balancing district policy with empathy, considering multiple perspectives, and factoring in the unique social contexts of each student. APs used RP and relational strategies to make disciplinary decisions that not only addressed immediate issues but also fostered long-term growth and understanding.

Social justice leadership emerged as a guiding framework, with APs prioritizing equity, fairness, and advocacy for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Their decision-making process reflected a deep dedication to creating equitable school environments, where social justice principles were not only advocated but actively practiced. Ultimately, this chapter emphasized APs' role in shaping a fair and

inclusive school culture through strategic decision making and social justice leadership, ensuring all students were valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In recent decades, school leadership responsibilities have become increasingly complex and multifaceted, shaped by persistent reform mandates, swiftly shifting demographics, technological advancements, diminishing financial support for schools, and heightened accountability through policy measures (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2012; Glanz, 1994; Gurley et al., 2013; Searby et al., 2016). Within this evolving landscape, identifying APs who understand how to advocate effectively for underserved children and families is essential for addressing the needs of historically marginalized populations. As entry-level administrators, APs, especially those serving in Title I urban K-12 public schools, often find themselves acting as transformative activists. These leaders promote social justice within their schools, critically examining the conditions that perpetuate inequities affecting marginalized groups and sustaining socially just practices in education (Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

Though substantial research exists on principals and their impact on school performance, studies explicitly focused on the AP role remain limited. Most existing research involving APs is quantitative, primarily concentrating on their tasks and readiness for eventual promotion to principal (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2017; Hausman et al., 2002; Hayes & Burkett, 2020). In contrast to the extensive literature on principals, research examining the AP role in fostering equity and inclusion remains scarce (Barnett et al., 2012; Bukoski et al., 2015). Consequently, there is little conceptual understanding of the AP role (Woo, 2020), and formalized job descriptions outlining their responsibilities are nearly absent (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Notably,

research exploring the AP role specifically in addressing exclusionary disciplinary practices is extremely limited.

This study addressed this critical gap by examining how APs make sense of the disciplinary processes within their schools and the actions they employ to meet the needs of all students by closing the racial discipline gap inherent in exclusionary discipline practices. The study was guided by three primary research questions and associated subquestions:

- **RQ1:** How do APs develop a social justice identity?
- **RQ2:** How do APs who self-identified as social justice leaders make sense of and work toward closing the racial discipline gap, if at all?
    a. What actions and/or strategies, if any, do APs use to close the racial discipline gap and systemic barriers within school discipline?
- **RQ3:** How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools?
    a. What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process?

Through exploring these questions, the study provides critical insights into the AP role, focusing specifically on how these leaders interpret and actively engage in reforming disciplinary practices to better serve all students.

Chapter 4 presented critical findings derived from a detailed exploration of APs in Title I urban K-12 schools, highlighting significant insights into their roles and approaches toward fostering equity and social justice leadership. Six major findings emerged from the data, identifying the complex ways APs develop their social justice

identities through lived and observed experiences and addressing systemic contributors to racial disparities, such as structural inequities, implicit bias, and deficiencies in cultural competence. Additionally, Chapter 4 examined the pivotal role of teachers, revealing them as both barriers and crucial partners in closing the racial discipline gap. Specific strategies employed by APs to navigate these challenges were also identified, emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with students and families, actively advocating for students, and incorporating restorative and equitable considerations into disciplinary referral processes. Finally, Chapter 4 illustrated the significant impact of relational factors and district policies on APs' decision making, underscoring both the potential and limitations within their roles.

Building upon these findings, Chapter 5 extends the discussion by providing deeper interpretations of the data in relation to existing scholarly literature. In this chapter, I first review and discuss the key findings in relation to established research, highlighting how this study contributes to and expands current understanding. Next, I present a revised conceptual framework, refined based on insights gained from these findings. Following this, I outline practical implications for PD, leadership preparation programs, and classroom practices, connecting specifically to teachers' roles identified in Chapter 4. Finally, I offer implications and targeted recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, providing practical guidance and identifying areas for further investigation. By integrating these chapters, this dissertation significantly contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding of the AP role in school discipline, offering actionable pathways toward systemic equity and justice within education.

Discussion of Findings

This chapter provides context and meaning to the study's major findings in response to the research questions. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 APs from 17 urban Title I public schools across the United States, I observed phenomena relevant to all aspects of the research framework. The discussion centers on six major findings reported by the participants: social justice identity development of APs, APs' perspectives on factors contributing to the racial discipline gap, teachers and the racial discipline gap, APs closing the racial discipline gap, processing discipline/behavioral referrals, and factors that influence the discipline process. The first finding supports Research Question 1, the next three findings support Research Question 2 and its subquestion, and the final two findings support Research Question 3 and its subquestion.

Interpretation of Finding 1: Social Justice Identity Development of APs

The development of a social justice identity among APs is shaped by personal encounters, observed inequities, and reflective practice (Furman, 2012; L. A. Goodman et al., 2018; Theoharis, 2007). As part of this process, APs define social justice leadership based on their beliefs, values, and experiences, thus influencing their approach to advocacy and equity in education. Research shows social justice leadership requires a commitment to dismantling systemic barriers and promoting inclusivity (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). In this study, I explored three key dimensions of social justice identity development: how APs define social justice leadership, how lived experiences shape their understanding of equity, and how observed experiences contribute to their leadership growth. L. A. Goodman et al. (2018) emphasized that social justice identity formation is a continuous process shaped by personal reflection, professional experiences, and

engagement with systemic inequities. Additionally, self-reflection emerged as a key factor in shaping APs' ability to challenge biases, address systemic barriers, and sustain equity-focused leadership (Shields, 2018). These findings indicate a social justice leadership identity is not static but rather evolves through reflection, learning, and action.

Defining Social Justice. Participants in this study conceptualized social justice leadership as advocacy, equity, and systemic change, emphasizing their role in dismantling inequitable structures. Many APs, such as Kate Dart, identified themselves as warriors or advocates, reflecting their proactive stance against systemic injustices. This aligns with Theoharis (2007) and Furman (2012), who asserted that effective SJLs engage in both relational advocacy and structural reform.

APs such as Israel Little and Morris Polk illustrated how understanding both visible and hidden systems of oppression fosters a more comprehensive approach to equity-driven leadership. Their perspectives align with Shields (2010), who argued that transformative SJLs must move beyond awareness and take decisive action against systemic inequities. The literature further supports that APs must leverage their leadership roles to enact policies that promote inclusion and challenge the use of discriminatory practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). This study reinforces that social justice leadership requires moral courage, advocacy, and policy intervention. Leaders must not only recognize inequities but actively work to dismantle the systems that sustain them.

Lived Experiences. Lived experiences serve as a foundation for equity-driven leadership. Leaders who have personally experienced oppression are more likely to develop a strong social justice orientation. Participants such as Morris Polk and Melinda Plaza demonstrated how firsthand experiences with systemic inequities fostered a sense

of urgency in addressing discriminatory policies. Khalifa et al. (2016) supported this finding, as they indicated leaders who have personally experienced marginalization are often more attuned to the needs of historically oppressed students. López et al. (2006) similarly found that leaders from marginalized backgrounds use their experiences to inform equity-driven decision making.

Jessica Meyer's experience further illustrates the role of racial identity consciousness in leadership development. As one of the few Black students in a predominantly White high school, she became acutely aware of racial biases in education. Her time at an HBCU reinforced her commitment to fostering inclusive environments where all students feel valued. L. A. Goodman et al. (2018) suggested navigating racially complex spaces strengthens a leader's commitment to justice-oriented practices. Jade Chambers's reflections highlighted how witnessing inequities among peers, even when not personally affected, can shape a social justice leadership identity. Shields (2010) argued that educational leaders who have observed systemic oppression often develop a strong sense of responsibility to challenge disparities.

This study reinforces that lived experiences significantly influence APs' approaches to social justice leadership. Leaders who have personally faced oppression are more likely to advocate for policies that promote inclusion and address inequities. These findings indicate leaders of school systems should actively recruit and support leaders with diverse backgrounds, as their perspectives contribute to equity-focused decision making.

Observed Experiences. For APs who had not personally experienced systemic oppression, observed experiences played a critical role in shaping their social justice

identity. Leaders such as Barclay Bond and Kay Holmes developed a commitment to equity by witnessing disparities in their schools. Mr. Bond's engagement in administrative equity meetings was transformative, challenging his assumptions about fairness in disciplinary policies. He reflected on how these discussions made him realize that what he had previously considered "neutral" policies often disproportionately affected marginalized students. His reflections align with Furman (2012), who asserted that exposure to diverse perspectives in professional settings prompts leaders to critically engage with equity issues.

Similarly, Bud Baker observed the disproportionate suspension rates of Black male students and was struck by how easily exclusionary disciplinary policies pushed students out of educational spaces. He noted that before closely examining these patterns, he had not questioned the traditional discipline model. This supports Shields's (2018) argument that SJLs must develop critical consciousness by actively interrogating systemic structures that disadvantage marginalized groups. Kay Holmes's experience with ELLs further highlights how witnessing systemic inequities fosters a social justice leadership identity. She recounted how one particular student struggled academically due to a lack of language support services, reinforcing her belief that equitable educational practices require more than just policy changes—they demand systemic restructuring. This aligns with Gooden and O'Doherty's (2015) research, which emphasizes the necessity of intentional reflection in addressing systemic inequities.

Israel Little's reflections highlighted how both lived and observed experiences shape a leader's social justice orientation. His self-identification as a Black man shaped his awareness of racial discrimination, whereas his socioeconomic privilege provided

access to spaces where he observed systemic inequities from a different vantage point. He described an incident where he saw an affluent student receive leniency for an infraction while a Black student from a lower-income background faced harsh punishment for a similar offense. This dual perspective reinforced his understanding of how oppression manifests across institutions, aligning with research that emphasizes the intersection of race and class in shaping leadership identity (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016). In his reflections, Mr. Little recounted a pivotal moment when he became acutely aware of systemic disparities. He stated, "There was a judge working in my city . . . taking kickbacks from adjudicated facilities for sending Black and Brown boys to those facilities." Witnessing the systemic criminalization of marginalized youth, he recognized broader institutional injustices. His experience aligns with research that showed SJLs with access to privileged spaces must leverage their awareness to disrupt oppressive systems (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Additionally, Mr. Little described how his observations of disciplinary disparities in schools mirrored the inequities present within the judicial system: "Looking at suspension rates nationally, then looking at suspension rates in our own area, was very, very disconcerting." His reflection highlights how privilege provided the opportunity to critically analyze systemic oppression while also offering a platform to challenge it. Shields (2018) asserted that transformative social justice leadership requires not only recognizing systemic inequities but also taking deliberate action to dismantle them. Mr. Little's ability to connect both lived and observed experiences underscores the importance of self-reflection in fostering a commitment to social justice leadership. His perspective supports research emphasizing the need for leaders to understand both

personal and systemic dimensions of inequity to enact meaningful change (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Theoharis, 2007).

Findings indicate lived experiences foster a deep personal commitment to equity-driven leadership, particularly among APs who have experienced systemic oppression firsthand. Participants such as Morris Polk and Melinda Plaza demonstrated how personal encounters with discrimination heightened their sense of urgency in advocating for marginalized students. Their reflections align with Khalifa et al. (2016) and López et al. (2006), who found that leaders from historically marginalized backgrounds often use their experiences as a foundation for equity-driven decision making. Similarly, Jessica Meyer's racial identity consciousness, developed through attending a predominantly White high school and later an HBCU, underscores how navigating racially complex spaces strengthens a leader's commitment to justice-oriented practices (D. J. Goodman et al., 2018).

Additionally, self-reflection emerged as a key factor in shaping APs' ability to challenge biases, address systemic barriers, and sustain equity-focused leadership. Participants who engaged in intentional self-reflection were more likely to recognize their own biases and take meaningful steps toward dismantling systemic inequities. Bud Baker, for instance, admitted that before deepening his engagement with social justice issues, he had assumed all students had access to the same opportunities. Acknowledging his privilege and biases transformed his leadership approach, aligning with Brown (2004) and L. A. Goodman et al. (2018), who argued that self-reflection is essential for dismantling inequitable systems. The literature further shows social justice leadership is not only about external advocacy but also about continuous self-examination (Gooden &

O'Doherty, 2015). Shields (2018) emphasized that transformative leadership requires moral courage, ongoing self-awareness, and a willingness to engage in difficult conversations about equity.

Reflection on the Complexity of Self-Identification Using the Dreyfus Model. The Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013) provides a structured, technical framework for categorizing expertise based on objective criteria such as experience, skills, and explicit knowledge. Though useful in delineating clear distinctions among levels of proficiency, its application to social justice leadership warrants nuanced consideration. Social justice leadership inherently involves adaptive challenges, reflective practices, ongoing critical self-assessment, and a deep disposition toward equity, none of which can be fully encapsulated by a purely technical model.

Participants' self-identification according to the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013) highlights a valuable but inherently limited perspective. Social justice leadership is inherently reflective, relational, and context-sensitive, aspects which the Dreyfus model's technical structure may not fully capture. For example:

- Morris Polk, identifying as an Expert, demonstrated intuitive decision making and systemic disruption. However, his reflective insights, such as advocating explicitly for systemic change through PD and book studies, highlight that social justice leadership transcends mere technical expertise.
- Israel Little described his leadership as disruptively intuitive, positioning himself as deeply aware of systemic oppression. His nuanced approach—tailoring responses to socio-cultural dynamics and gang-related tensions—extends beyond the technical categorization provided by the model,

underscoring that social justice leadership involves critical and adaptive understanding.

- Kate Dart emphasized truth-telling and equity-driven decisions, explicitly criticizing policies perceived as perpetuating inequities. Her reflective, context-sensitive actions underscore the inadequacy of viewing social justice leadership solely through a rigid proficiency framework.
- Craig Tetter and Jackson Glisson both identified as Competent, yet each consistently exhibited reflective actions and deliberate, structured strategies aimed at equitable outcomes. Their proactive, critical reflection on implicit bias highlights the adaptive dimension absent from purely technical categorizations.
- Manfred Perkins self-identified as Novice, reflecting his reliance on rules and structured policies. Yet, even his leadership involved reflecting on community contexts, demonstrating that expertise in social justice leadership requires more adaptive skills than the Dreyfus model's novice stage may imply.
- Viola Rowse and Kay Holmes rated themselves as Proficient, deeply engaging in reflection and continuous learning. Their nuanced responses to systemic barriers and active commitment to restorative practices illustrate that proficiency is not simply technical skill but involves considerable reflective and adaptive elements.
- Bud Baker and Jessica Meyer labeled themselves as Experts, underscoring how their nuanced reflective practices and sophisticated understandings of

systemic inequities consistently guided their adaptive actions, beyond technical application alone.

- Participants like Andrea Blake and Melinda Plaza, who self-identified at advanced beginner and advanced levels respectively, clearly showed deep personal and reflective engagement with social justice, highlighting the limitation of using only experience-based technical criteria to measure their competence.

This complexity suggests that though the Dreyfus model provides helpful language to discuss levels of proficiency, social justice leadership demands a recognition of adaptive and reflective dimensions beyond the scope of a purely industrialized, technical model. Recognizing this limitation encourages viewing participants' self-identifications not as fixed categories, but as dynamic reflections of their ongoing, adaptive journey toward equitable leadership practices.

Summary. The development of a social justice identity among APs is influenced by personal encounters, observed inequities, and reflective practices (Furman, 2012; L. A. Goodman et al., 2018; Theoharis, 2007). This identity shapes their approach to advocacy and equity in educational settings. Participants defined social justice leadership through their personal beliefs, values, and experiences, emphasizing advocacy, equity, and systemic change as central tenets. Effective social justice leadership involves dismantling systemic barriers and promoting inclusive educational environments (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007).

Participants such as Kate Dart explicitly identified themselves as advocates or warriors, emphasizing their proactive stance against systemic injustices, consistent with

literature highlighting the need for relational advocacy and structural reform (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). APs like Israel Little and Morris Polk articulated the importance of recognizing both visible and hidden systems of oppression, aligning with Shields (2010), who asserted that transformative leadership requires decisive action against systemic inequities.

Lived experiences significantly shaped APs' social justice identities. APs who personally experienced oppression, including Morris Polk, Melinda Plaza, and Jessica Meyer, developed heightened urgency toward equity-driven leadership, aligning with findings from Khalifa et al. (2016) and López et al. (2006). Ms. Meyer's awareness of racial identity, shaped by her experiences at predominantly White and historically Black institutions, further illustrates how navigating racially complex environments strengthens commitment to inclusive practices (L. A. Goodman et al., 2018).

For APs without direct personal experiences of oppression, observed inequities significantly influenced their social justice identities. Barclay Bond, Bud Baker, and Kay Holmes each highlighted transformative reflections from witnessing systemic disparities within their schools. Mr. Bond's engagement with equity discussions altered his understanding of "neutral" policies, while Mr. Baker critically examined exclusionary discipline practices impacting Black male students, underscoring the importance of intentional reflection in developing a critical consciousness (Shields, 2018). Ms. Holmes emphasized the systemic restructuring necessary for equitable educational practices, consistent with Gooden and O'Doherty's (2015) findings.

Israel Little's insights uniquely bridged both lived and observed experiences. His socioeconomic privilege, alongside personal racial consciousness, provided a dual

perspective on inequities. Mr. Little critically engaged with systemic oppression, evidenced by his observations of disparities within judicial and educational systems, highlighting the intersectional nature of social justice leadership (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Participants' self-identification using the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model (Honken, 2013) revealed limitations when applied to social justice leadership. Though useful for defining expertise technically, the model inadequately captures the reflective, relational, and adaptive nature intrinsic to social justice work. Leaders such as Mr. Polk, Ms. Dart, and Mr. Little, despite their self-rating as experts, demonstrated leadership extending beyond technical criteria, emphasizing adaptive responses and critical reflection. Similarly, self-ratings by participants like Mr. Tetter, Mr. Glisson, Mr. Perkins, Ms. Rowse, Ms. Holmes, Mr. Baker, Ms. Meyer, Ms. Blake, and Ms. Plaza highlighted the nuanced and context-sensitive dimensions of social justice leadership, reinforcing that adaptive competencies transcend strictly technical categorizations.

This study underscores the importance of both lived and observed experiences in shaping APs' social justice identities. Reflection emerged as a crucial component in sustaining their commitment to equity and advocacy. Recommendations include enhancing leadership preparation programs by incorporating structured reflective practices and exposure to diverse perspectives. Educational leaders must actively recruit and support administrators from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that their experiences inform policy and practice to foster equitable educational environments.

Interpretation of Finding 2: APs' Perspectives on Contributing Factors to the Racial Discipline Gap

The second finding highlights APs' perspectives on the racial discipline gap, identifying structural inequities, implicit bias, and a deficiency in cultural competence as key contributors. These findings align with research emphasizing how systemic factors shape discipline disparities for marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Skiba et al., 2011). Discipline disparities are not merely a result of student behavior but are deeply embedded in school policies, teacher perceptions, and the broader educational system (Gregory et al., 2010). The disproportionate discipline of students from marginalized backgrounds, particularly Black and Hispanic students, has been widely documented and attributed to systemic barriers rather than individual behaviors (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Noguera, 2008).

Research indicates exclusionary discipline policies such as suspensions and expulsions disproportionately affect students of color, exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2019; Meiners, 2011). These disparities are often reinforced by zero tolerance policies, which disproportionately affect Black and Brown students, leading to long-term negative academic and social outcomes (E. W. Morris, 2016; Wun, 2016). The overrepresentation of marginalized students in exclusionary discipline indicates that punitive measures are not applied equitably and are instead shaped by structural racism, implicit biases, and cultural misunderstandings within the education system (R. Epstein et al., 2017; Gilliam et al., 2016).

In this interpretation, I explore how the themes of structural inequities, implicit bias, and cultural competence reflect the existing literature and the broader implications

for social justice leadership. Structural inequities refer to the systemic barriers that sustain discipline disparities, including disparities in special education placement, access to resources, and policy implementation (Khalifa et al., 2016; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Implicit bias affects how teachers and administrators perceive student behavior, often leading to harsher disciplinary responses for students of color (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Additionally, a deficiency in cultural competence among educators contributes to misinterpretations of student behaviors, resulting in punitive rather than restorative approaches (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Understanding APs' perspectives on these factors is crucial for addressing discipline disparities and promoting equity in school environments. The transformative and social justice leadership frameworks emphasize the need for educational leaders to challenge inequitable disciplinary policies, address biases, and advocate for culturally responsive practices (Shields, 2018; Theoharis, 2007). By situating these findings within the broader research, this study underscores the urgency of addressing discipline disparities through systemic change, educator training, and intentional policy reform.

Structural Inequities. Participants highlighted how structural inequities, such as disparities in special education placement, access to resources, and zero tolerance policies, reinforce the racial discipline gap. Research confirms that Black and Hispanic students, particularly those in special education, are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline (Annamma et al., 2019; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Israel Little underscored the stark contrast in special education services between affluent and low SES schools, noting that wraparound services are normalized in urban schools but largely absent in wealthier districts. This finding aligns with Skiba et al. (2011), who argued that

students of color, particularly Black boys in special education, are more likely to be labeled as disruptive and placed in restrictive educational settings. Similarly, Melinda Plaza observed that special education referrals and exclusionary discipline disproportionately target Black and Hispanic students, reinforcing systemic biases in student categorization and disciplinary responses (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Jackson Glisson's reflection on the "Joe Clark Era" highlighted how zero tolerance policies disproportionately affect students of color. His observations align with research demonstrating that these policies, originally designed to maintain school order, have disproportionately criminalized Black and Brown students by prioritizing punitive rather than restorative responses (Meiners, 2011). Studies have shown that predominantly White schools tend to handle discipline more flexibly, whereas urban schools serving marginalized communities adhere to strict disciplinary codes, leading to higher rates of suspensions and expulsions for students of color (Gregory et al., 2010).

Implicit Bias. Implicit bias emerged as another factor contributing to disproportionate discipline outcomes. Participants noted that teachers' perceptions of Black and Brown students' behavior often reflect societal biases, leading to harsher disciplinary actions for students of color compared to their White peers for similar infractions. Research supports this finding, showing teachers often misinterpret the behavior of Black students as more aggressive, defiant, or disruptive (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Morris Polk and Jessica Meyer specifically discussed the adultification of Black girls, where Black female students are perceived as more mature and less innocent than their White counterparts, leading to harsher discipline for behaviors typically excused in White students (R. Epstein et al., 2017). This aligns

with studies showing that Black girls are over-policed in schools and disciplined for subjective infractions such as “attitude” or “defiance” (E. W. Morris, 2016). Similarly, Ms. Meyer highlighted how racialized stereotypes of Black boys as aggressive or misfits contribute to discipline disparities. Her comments reflected research on the “criminalization of Black masculinity” in schools, where Black male students are disproportionately suspended and expelled, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline (Noguera, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011).

Participants also pointed to media portrayals of Black and Brown students as reinforcing implicit biases. Clara Romero referenced dress code policies as disproportionately targeting Black students, a pattern confirmed by research showing that policies against hoodies, hairstyles, and cultural expressions disproportionately affect students of color (Wun, 2016). Her example underscores how implicit biases shape disciplinary enforcement, reinforcing racial disparities in school discipline.

Deficiency in Cultural Competence. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that a lack of cultural competence among educators contributes to the racial discipline gap. Many emphasized that teachers misinterpret culturally-specific behaviors as defiance, resulting in punitive rather than corrective responses. Studies support this claim, indicating educators with limited cultural awareness are more likely to misunderstand students’ communication styles and disciplinary needs (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Craig Tetter and Melinda Plaza emphasized that the racial discipline gap is not a reflection of inherent behavioral differences but rather a failure of schools to prioritize cultural competency. Their perspectives align with research that indicated culturally responsive pedagogy can help mitigate discipline disparities by fostering more inclusive

and affirming learning environments (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Clara Romero illustrated how a lack of understanding of Black colloquialisms and expressions often results in unnecessary disciplinary actions. This highlights the role of miseducation and the need for school leaders to train educators in culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017). Iris Kale and Andrea Blake further emphasized that upbringing, personal experiences, and a lack of exposure to diverse communities shape educators' implicit biases and disciplinary decisions. Research shows teachers who lack cross-cultural exposure often bring deficit-based perspectives into the classroom, reinforcing systemic inequities (Howard, 2010).

Summary. The second finding highlights that structural inequities, implicit bias, and a lack of cultural competence contribute to the racial discipline gap. These findings align with existing research on discipline disparities, emphasizing that discipline policies disproportionately affect students of color due to the systemic biases in education (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Addressing these disparities requires transformative social justice leadership that actively challenges systemic inequities, promotes culturally responsive pedagogy, and revises discipline policies to ensure fairness for all students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2007). APs must engage in critical reflection, equity-centered decision making, and advocacy to dismantle racial disparities in school discipline. Moving forward, leaders of educational institutions must prioritize anti-racist leadership training, equity-driven policy reforms, and systemic change to create inclusive school environments for marginalized students (Paris & Alim, 2017; Shields, 2018).

Interpretation of Finding 3: Teachers and the Racial Discipline Gap

Equitable discipline practices remain a critical yet challenging area of reform in K-12 education. Despite growing awareness of the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on students of color, efforts to implement equity-driven disciplinary approaches are often met with resistance from teachers. This resistance is influenced by multiple factors, including implicit bias, deeply ingrained beliefs about discipline and student behavior, and a lack of confidence in the use of restorative or culturally responsive strategies. Research indicates teacher resistance to equitable discipline is often rooted in a reliance on punitive models that prioritize control and compliance over relationship building and student-centered interventions (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). Without targeted support and systemic accountability, many educators revert to traditional punitive measures, perpetuating racial disparities in discipline outcomes (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Participants in this study described encountering resistance from teachers when implementing restorative discipline practices, cultural competency training, and alternative discipline models that emphasize student voice and engagement. Many teachers expressed skepticism about restorative justice, viewing it as ineffective or overly lenient, particularly in high-discipline environments. Others resisted PD on implicit bias and culturally responsive teaching, demonstrating a reluctance to acknowledge how their personal beliefs and experiences shape disciplinary decision making. These findings align with the existing literature that highlighted the challenges of shifting teacher mindsets away from exclusionary discipline approaches and toward more inclusive and equitable frameworks (Milner, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017).

In this section, I explore the complexities of teacher resistance, identifying key barriers to equity-centered discipline practices while also highlighting strategies that have proven to be effective in fostering change. Participants noted that structured PD, data-driven discussions, and book studies on equity and implicit bias helped some educators become more open to shifting their disciplinary approaches. However, sustaining these efforts requires ongoing support, administrative accountability, and a cultural shift in how schools define discipline and student behavior management.

Teachers' Lack of Understanding of the Racial Discipline Gap. Participants noted some teachers lacked awareness of how their disciplinary practices contributed to racial disparities. Commonly, educators made statements such as, "I don't see color" or "I'm already doing enough for these kids," which minimized the lived experiences of students of color. Craig Tetter explained that such remarks reflected a failure to acknowledge systemic inequities. Research supports this, indicating a colorblind ideology prevents educators from critically examining their biases and perpetuates disciplinary disparities (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Milner, 2020).

Resistance to acknowledging these inequities was also linked to reluctance to change disciplinary practices. Kate Dart described how some teachers ignored struggling students rather than adapting their methods to provide additional support. Viola Rowse similarly observed that some educators, particularly those who had been teaching for decades, resisted change and preferred traditional approaches to discipline. This aligns with research that demonstrated many educators uphold outdated discipline models despite evidence that these approaches disproportionately harm students from marginalized backgrounds (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011).

Implicit biases also shape teachers' disciplinary decisions. Jessica Meyer and Morris Polk discussed how Black girls are often perceived as more mature than their White peers, leading to harsher punishments, a phenomenon known as adultification bias (R. Epstein et al., 2017). Clara Romero highlighted how dress code policies disproportionately target Black students, reinforcing racialized discipline disparities (Wun, 2016). These examples illustrate the urgent need for culturally responsive discipline practices. Despite ongoing efforts, participants reported continued resistance from teachers, many of whom dismissed discussions about racial bias or viewed equity initiatives as unnecessary. Research shows educators who feel defensive about their disciplinary decisions may resist systemic critiques, particularly if they perceive discussions of racial disparities as personal attacks (Bonilla Silva, 2018). This underscores the importance of framing equity work as a collective institutional responsibility rather than an individual failure (Shields, 2018).

Engaging Teachers to Advance the Closing of the Racial Discipline Gap. To address resistance, participants emphasized the importance of PD, data-driven discussions, and reflective practice. Craig Tetter stressed that using discipline data helped initiate critical conversations about equity. His school facilitated equity dialogues where educators analyzed discipline trends and reflected on how policies disproportionately affected students of color. Research supports this approach, highlighting that data-driven discussions can shift educators' perspectives and foster equitable discipline practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

PD was another key strategy that emerged. Viola Rowse described PD sessions that clarified the distinction between equity and equality, using visuals to illustrate how

different students require different levels of support. These approaches align with research demonstrating that culturally responsive training reduces discipline disparities (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). Participants also found success in book studies. Bud Baker facilitated monthly diversity training and Kate Dart initiated a book club on equity-centered trauma-informed education. These initiatives encouraged reflection and self-awareness, both of which are essential for disrupting implicit biases (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Shields, 2018). Similarly, Jackson Glisson encouraged teachers to evaluate their classroom policies and ensure their lessons met the needs of all students. Research indicates educators who consistently reflect on their biases and instructional methods are more likely to implement equitable discipline approaches (Howard, 2010).

However, sustaining long-term commitment to equitable discipline reform emerged as a major challenge. Some teachers initially engaged in PD sessions but reverted to punitive discipline when classroom challenges arose. This pattern aligns with equity fatigue, where educators struggle to sustain culturally responsive practices without ongoing support and accountability (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Participants who reinforced key equity principles and followed up with teachers were more successful in fostering sustained change.

Contending With the Challenges. Despite efforts to increase engagement, participants faced persistent resistance when advocating for equitable discipline practices. Some teachers dismissed racial disparities outright, whereas others disengaged from equity discussions altogether. Morris Polk emphasized the importance of persistence and ensuring accountability by consistently following up with teachers. His approach aligns

with research on social justice leadership, which stresses the need for sustained advocacy to challenge inequitable practices (Shields, 2018; Theoharis, 2007).

The emotional toll of this work was another challenge. Mr. Polk described the importance of resilience, echoing Jackson Glisson's assertion that equity work requires persistence and a refusal to adopt a defeatist mindset. This finding supports research that indicated SJLs often encounter resistance but must remain committed to systemic change (Khalifa et al., 2016). The participants also leveraged community resources to counteract punitive discipline measures. Myrtle Hill collaborated with a local judge to provide mentorship and legal guidance to students at risk of disciplinary action. This strategy aligns with research emphasizing that RP, community partnerships, and family engagement are crucial in reducing exclusionary discipline and promoting student success (Annamma et al., 2019; Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Summary. The findings of this study underscore the persistent challenges in reforming disciplinary practices and the need for comprehensive systemic change. Teacher resistance, stemming from a lack of awareness, implicit bias, and a reluctance to change, continues to be a significant barrier. However, strategies such as PD, data-driven discussions, and book studies have shown promise in fostering cultural responsiveness among educators. Though these efforts have led to progress, sustaining equitable discipline practices remains a challenge, as some teachers revert to punitive approaches when faced with classroom difficulties.

Addressing these deeply-rooted disparities requires a multifaceted approach. Systemic changes, including ongoing PD, culturally responsive teaching, and RP, are essential to dismantling exclusionary discipline policies. Beyond policy reform, a

fundamental cultural shift is needed, one that redefines how educators perceive and respond to student behavior. Research has demonstrated that PD focusing on implicit bias and equity-centered discipline policies can significantly improve teacher responses to student behavior (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, culturally responsive pedagogy has been shown to foster stronger student–teacher relationships and improve disciplinary outcomes (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). However, without a sustained commitment from school district leaders, including comprehensive teacher training, equity-centered leadership development, and accountability structures, meaningful change will remain elusive. By prioritizing these efforts, school leaders can create environments where discipline is fair, just, and reflective of the diverse needs of all students. Implementing these evidence-based practices will not only close the racial discipline gap but foster a more equitable and inclusive education system for all students.

Moving forward, school district leaders should integrate equity-centered discipline models into leadership training programs, ensuring APs and teachers have the tools they need to create lasting change. Ongoing PD should focus on implicit bias, restorative justice, and equity-based decision making to prevent the reemergence of punitive disciplinary models. Additionally, structured equity audits should be conducted regularly to assess disciplinary disparities, thus ensuring accountability in schools. Establishing mentorship programs that connect experienced SJLs with emerging administrators can also provide guidance in navigating the complexities of discipline reform. Future research should explore the long-term impact of AP-led discipline reforms on student outcomes, school culture, and racial equity in education. Examining how these strategies influence teacher mindsets and behavioral responses over time can offer

valuable insights into their effectiveness. By embedding these efforts into systemic frameworks rather than treating them as isolated initiatives, educators can work toward sustainable, transformative change that fosters equity and justice for all students.

Interpretation of Finding 4: APs Closing the Racial Discipline Gap

Racial disparities in school discipline remain a significant challenge, with students of color, particularly Black and Brown students, being disproportionately subjected to exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions (Gregory et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). These disparities contribute to long-term academic setbacks and reinforce cycles of systemic inequality. Research shows addressing this issue requires leadership that actively challenges inequitable policies, fosters culturally responsive practices, and implements restorative approaches to discipline (Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2007).

APs play a critical role in disrupting established patterns by integrating social justice leadership into their daily practice. As the frontline administrators who are responsible for discipline enforcement, their decisions and approaches significantly shape the school climate and student outcomes (Shields, 2010). This study highlighted some of the ways in which APs work to close the racial discipline gap through advocacy, relationship building, and a commitment to equity-centered leadership. Participants described their efforts to challenge systemic barriers, foster meaningful relationships with students and families, and advocate for discipline practices that prioritize fairness and inclusion. Despite systemic resistance, APs who embrace social justice leadership take deliberate action to create equitable learning environments. Their approaches align with transformative leadership frameworks, which emphasize dismantling oppressive

structures and fostering institutional change (Shields, 2010). Additionally, culturally responsive school leadership models stress the importance of listening to students, engaging in equity-driven conversations, and advocating for historically marginalized populations (Khalifa, 2018).

In this section, I explore how APs operationalize their social justice identities to address disciplinary inequities. I examine how they serve as catalysts for change, emphasizing the importance of relationship building and student advocacy in closing the racial discipline gap. Though their efforts are impactful, sustaining these practices requires structural support, PD, and policy reform to ensure equity-driven discipline is not solely dependent on the commitment of individual administrators.

APs' Social Justice Identity Drives Change. Participants emphasized that addressing racial disparities in school discipline requires more than acknowledgment. It demands deliberate action. The reflections of Craig Tetter and Israel Little demonstrated how social justice leadership involves challenging systemic barriers and advocating for marginalized students. Their willingness to engage in courageous conversations about White privilege, implicit bias, and systemic oppression aligns with CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which calls for educators to confront the racialized structures that are embedded in school policies.

Israel Little's statement about resisting oppressive systems echoes the work of Love (2019), who argued that educators must disrupt practices that marginalize Black and Brown students. His emphasis on action aligns with Theoharis's (2007) concept of social justice leadership, which highlights the need to resist inequitable practices rather than merely acknowledging them. Another key element of this theme is the distinction

between equity and equality. Jake Tuttle and Bud Baker stressed that equitable school leadership means ensuring each student receives what they need rather than applying uniform disciplinary policies. This perspective aligns with the findings of Skiba et al. (2014), who argued that discipline policies must be tailored to address the unique needs of students rather than enforced through one-size-fits-all approaches.

Building Relationships. Participants described relationship building as a critical strategy for reducing racial disparities in discipline. Their reflections support existing research that highlighted how strong teacher–student relationships contribute to lower suspension rates and improved academic outcomes for students of color (Gregory et al., 2010; Milner, 2020). Clara Romero's belief that students are more likely to engage when they feel valued aligns with the ethics of care framework (Noddings, 2012), which emphasizes the role of genuine relationships in fostering student success. She noted that when teachers fail to connect with students, disciplinary issues often arise, reinforcing Howard's (2019) finding that negative teacher–student interactions contribute to racial disparities in discipline.

Morris Polk highlighted the importance of communication in preventing disciplinary conflicts. His emphasis on elevating student voices aligns with the restorative justice literature, which posits that punitive discipline policies are less effective than relationship-centered approaches (Lustick, 2017). Participants who engaged in restorative dialogue and transparency with students and families reflected the work of Gregory and Evans (2020), who argued that restorative justice practices help build trust and reduce exclusionary discipline outcomes. Israel Little expanded on this theme by emphasizing the role of school climate teams in strengthening relationships with families and the

community. His reflections align with J. L. Epstein's (2011) research on school–family partnerships, which highlighted that student outcomes improve when schools engage with families as active partners in the educational process.

Student Advocacy. The findings indicate advocacy is a central responsibility for APs who are seeking to close the racial discipline gap. Participants described their efforts to ensure students feel seen, valued, and supported. Their reflections align with research by Carter Andrews et al. (2019), who argued that advocacy in schools is critical for creating inclusive learning environments where students of color feel a sense of belonging.

Jessica Meyer and Kate Dart emphasized that advocacy is more than intervention. It is about proactively creating spaces where all students feel affirmed. Their perspectives support Theoharis's (2007) work, which indicated equity-driven leadership requires school leaders to take an active role in disrupting inequitable practices. Jade Chambers highlighted the need to advocate for students across different identity groups, noting that school leaders must address not only racial inequities but also issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation. Her perspective aligns with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), which indicates multiple forms of oppression intersect in students' experiences and must be addressed holistically. Viola Rowse reflected on how she had grown as a leader, emphasizing that effective advocacy requires strategic thinking and active listening. Her insights support research by Ishimaru (2020), which highlighted the importance of school leaders listening to students and families to create policies that reflect their needs and lived experiences.

Summary. This study reinforces that APs serve as key agents in closing the racial discipline gap through social justice leadership, relationship building, and advocacy. Participants' reflections aligned with the existing literature on discipline disparities, emphasizing the need for systemic change in school discipline policies (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014; Theoharis, 2007). Though APs are often at the forefront of discipline decisions, their leadership in equity efforts is not always prioritized in broader school-wide initiatives. By positioning APs as key leaders in discipline reform, school leaders can ensure systemic change will be both meaningful and sustainable (Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

Empowering APs as equity leaders is essential to sustaining long-term change. School district leaders must provide leadership opportunities focused on equity-driven discipline reform to strengthen their impact (Theoharis, 2007). APs who prioritize advocacy, transparency, and relationship building create more inclusive school environments where students receive fair and supportive treatment (Noddings, 2012). By integrating participant insights with existing research, this study provides actionable strategies for addressing one of the most pressing issues in education today.

Moving forward, school leaders must prioritize relationship-based discipline models and ensure equity-driven leadership is not solely dependent on individual APs but embedded within district-wide policies. District leaders should implement mentorship programs that pair experienced SJLs with emerging administrators to sustain momentum in addressing racial disparities. Additionally, research should be conducted to explore how APs can be better supported in maintaining their advocacy efforts, particularly in environments where there is resistance to change. By embedding these efforts into

systemic frameworks, all educators can work toward sustainable, transformative change that fosters equity and justice for all students.

Interpretation of Finding 5: Processing Discipline/Behavioral Referrals

Finding 5 reflects how the APs navigated the disciplinary process within their schools, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of decision making when processing behavioral referrals. As the school leaders responsible for discipline enforcement, APs must evaluate multiple factors before determining appropriate responses to student behavior. This process involves considering the perspectives of teachers and students, assessing contextual and environmental influences, and deciding whether restorative or exclusionary discipline is the best course of action. These findings align with research on transformative leadership that emphasized equity, fairness, and restorative approaches in school discipline (Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Additionally, the study supports the tenets of social justice leadership, which advocate for minimizing exclusionary discipline practices and ensuring the equitable treatment of students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Khalifa, 2018).

The Discipline/Behavioral Referral Process. A central theme emerging from this study is that APs approach discipline referrals as investigative processes rather than automatically enforcing punitive measures. Participants such as Kate Dart and Craig Tetter emphasized the importance of hearing both the teacher's and student's perspectives before determining consequences. This finding aligns with research on culturally responsive discipline, which advocates for discipline processes that incorporate

student voice, context, and relational engagement rather than immediate punishment (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Additionally, restorative approaches being practiced by APs like Jackson Glisson and Craig Tetter reflects a broader shift in discipline models. Rather than relying on punitive measures, these APs engaged students in conversations that encouraged self-reflection and alternative ways of managing conflict. This approach is supported by research that indicated restorative justice practices contribute to lower suspension rates, improved student behavior, and stronger school climates (K. R. Evans & Lester, 2013; Gregory et al., 2010). Furthermore, the study highlighted how APs like Israel Little recognize that disciplinary incidents do not occur in isolation. Instead of solely focusing on student actions, Mr. Little's reflections align with research on equity-centered discipline, which emphasizes the need to examine institutional responsibility in shaping student behavior (Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Teacher Referral Considerations. APs also evaluate the referring teacher's role in the discipline process. Participants such as Andrea Blake and Viola Rowse highlighted that they assessed a teacher's history of referrals, classroom management skills, and interactions with students before deciding on disciplinary actions. This finding supports research that showed implicit bias and teacher–student relationships significantly influence discipline outcomes, often leading to disproportionate disciplinary actions against students of color (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014).

For instance, Ms. Blake discussed coaching teachers who frequently referred the same students for minor infractions and helping them develop classroom management strategies that reduced unnecessary referrals. This aligns with research on PD for

teachers, which showed training on culturally responsive discipline helps reduce bias and foster equitable learning environments (Gay, 2018; Milner, 2020). Furthermore, APs like Ms. Rowse considered factors such as a teacher's experience level, questioning whether newer teachers were overly reliant on referrals due to a lack of effective behavior management strategies. Research indicates novice teachers often struggle with classroom management and may disproportionately refer students for disciplinary action, highlighting the need for mentorship and training in student-centered discipline practices (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Student Referral Considerations. Beyond assessing teachers' referral patterns, the APs also evaluated students' backgrounds and circumstances when determining disciplinary responses. Participants such as Jackson Glisson and Manfred Perkins emphasized the importance of engaging both students and their families to gain a holistic understanding of students' needs. This approach aligns with J. L. Epstein's (2011) framework for family–school partnerships, which underscored the benefits of collaborative engagement in addressing student behavior.

Additionally, Mr. Perkins considered socioeconomic factors such as food insecurity, home stability, and external responsibilities (e.g., students working at night) when processing discipline referrals. Research indicates poverty-related stressors often contribute to student behavior challenges, and schools that implement trauma-informed disciplinary practices experience better student outcomes (Craig, 2016; Mallett, 2017). Similarly, Viola Rowse examined how a student's academic performance, attendance, or personal responsibilities, such as parenting, might influence disciplinary incidents.

Studies show discipline decisions should account for students' holistic needs rather than focusing solely on behavior in isolation (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Noguera, 2003).

Environmental and Contextual Factors. Participants also considered broader environmental influences when addressing discipline referrals. For example, Israel Little emphasized cultural awareness in school discipline, particularly in relation to gang involvement and community violence. His reflections align with research on how neighborhood environments influence student behavior, suggesting school leaders should adopt trauma-informed approaches to discipline when working with students who are affected by community violence (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Khalifa, 2018).

Similarly, Andrea Blake and Craig Tetter discussed how students often repeated language and behaviors learned at home, which may be perceived differently in a school setting. This finding supports research on cultural mismatch in schools that showed disciplinary disparities often arise from misinterpretations of student behavior rather than deliberate misconduct (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). These perspectives underscore the importance of culturally competent discipline practices that account for diverse student experiences and communication styles.

Determining the Truth. Another critical theme was APs' commitment to conducting thorough investigations to ensure fairness in disciplinary decisions. Participants like Jake Tuttle and Bud Baker acknowledged the challenges of determining the truth when multiple perspectives existed. Their emphasis on gathering student testimonies, consulting teachers, and using video evidence aligned with research on due process in school discipline, which stressed the importance of fair and transparent disciplinary investigations (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014).

Additionally, Mr. Tuttle's awareness of the disproportionate discipline of Black students aligns with research that indicated students of color, particularly Black males, are more likely to receive harsher punishments for subjective infractions such as "disrespect" or "insubordination" (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2010). His reflections highlight the role of APs in mitigating bias and ensuring equitable treatment of students in disciplinary decision making.

Reframing Punitive Practices. The APs emphasized reframing traditional punitive discipline practices into opportunities for student learning and development. Participants highlighted courageous conversations, a key practical component, involving direct engagement with students to explore underlying reasons for their behavior, promote reflection on the impacts of their actions, and collaboratively develop constructive pathways forward. This aligns with restorative justice principles, focusing on reconciliation, understanding, and growth. Israel Little underscored this approach, stating, "I prioritize removing the student from the spotlight and ensuring private conversations that allow for genuine reflection and growth, not public shaming." Similarly, Jackson Glisson emphasized, "Restorative conversations with students and their families are crucial. They help everyone involved understand what happened and why, turning discipline into a meaningful learning experience."

Challenges and Limitations. Despite their commitment, APs acknowledged limitations in implementing growth-oriented discipline. Constraints of their roles and contextual school factors posed significant barriers. Viola Rowse expressed, "The school setting, including resistance from staff who favor traditional discipline methods, can limit our ability to fully implement restorative practices." Kay Holmes further reflected on

systemic limitations, explaining, “District policies and resource constraints can hinder our capacity to provide consistent follow-up, limiting the potential impact of these growth-oriented disciplinary interventions.”

Actions Toward Social Justice Leadership. To effectively bridge theory and practice, the APs proactively engaged in several key measures. They facilitated equity-focused PD sessions addressing implicit bias, culturally responsive practices, and restorative justice methodologies (Gay, 2018; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Additionally, APs regularly conducted equity audits to systematically track discipline disparities, fostering data-driven systemic change (Khalifa, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014). They also advocated for policy revisions at district levels to support restorative and equitable disciplinary approaches (Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Furthermore, the APs created structured opportunities, including facilitated book studies and professional learning communities, encouraging teachers’ critical reflection on disciplinary practices (Milner, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Importantly, they prioritized building and nurturing strong relationships with students and families through consistent, transparent communication, thereby fostering trust and ensuring clear disciplinary procedures (Gregory et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014). These actions highlight the active role of APs as SJLs, effectively translating theoretical frameworks into practical outcomes. Their dedication to culturally responsive, equity-driven practices demonstrates their commitment to transforming disciplinary processes, addressing systemic inequities, and cultivating inclusive school environments. APs consistently advocate reframing discipline from punitive measures to growth-oriented practices, emphasizing courageous conversations and restorative justice.

Although mindful of existing limitations, they persistently push for structural support and policy alignment with social justice principles to ensure sustained and equitable discipline reform.

Summary. Finding 5 underscores the complexities of school discipline and highlights APs' critical role in fostering equitable, restorative, and growth-oriented approaches. The APs emphasized reframing discipline from punitive actions toward meaningful opportunities for student development through RP and courageous conversations. Their decision-making processes reflect social justice leadership by emphasizing fairness, cultural responsiveness, and engaging students directly to understand behaviors and collaboratively seek constructive outcomes. The APs also identified role-specific constraints and contextual challenges within school environments, such as staff resistance and systemic policy limitations, which can hinder the implementation and effectiveness of these growth-focused disciplinary interventions. Moving forward, school district leaders should integrate equity-centered discipline training into AP leadership development programs, including professional learning on RP, implicit bias, courageous conversations, and trauma-informed discipline. Additionally, district leaders should implement formalized discipline equity audits to track patterns of disproportionate discipline, address systemic biases, and provide structural support to fully realize equitable discipline reforms. Transparency in discipline data can further help school leaders proactively adjust policies and interventions, sustaining environments conducive to both student accountability and growth.

Finding 6: Factors That Influence the Discipline Process

Finding 6 explores the key factors shaping how APs determine disciplinary outcomes for students. Participants identified two primary influences: student relational factors and district policy. Relational factors refer to the relationships APs develop with students and how these connections affect the discipline process, and district policies provide structured guidelines that influence decision making. This finding addresses the subquestion of Research Question 3, examining how APs make sense of the discipline process in their schools.

This finding aligns with transformative leadership principles, emphasizing a balance between maintaining school safety and fostering student development through equitable and restorative approaches (Khalifa, 2018; Shields, 2010). Additionally, it supports social justice leadership, which advocates for discipline practices that minimize harm, address implicit bias, and promote fair treatment for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Theoharis, 2007).

Relational Factors. A central theme in this study was the impact of AP–student relationships on disciplinary decision making. Participants such as Andrea Blake emphasized that though consequences for infractions remained consistent, her approach varied depending on her relationship with the student. This aligns with research on relational trust in school leadership, which showed strong student–administrator relationships contribute to positive behavioral outcomes and increased student engagement in the discipline process (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Craig Tetter acknowledged the challenge of making disciplinary decisions for students he had grown to care about. He emphasized continued support, aligning with

research on student-centered discipline that balances accountability with emotional support (Gregory et al., 2010). Kay Holmes provided a compelling example of a student who initially resisted forming a relationship but eventually became more vulnerable in their conversations. Despite building a strong connection, the student's behavior remained unchanged, requiring Ms. Holmes to make difficult but necessary decisions for the safety of the school community. This finding supports studies that showed that though relationships are a protective factor against negative behavioral outcomes, they must be complemented by clear expectations and accountability measures (Milner, 2020; Noguera, 2003).

Overall, participants indicated relationships play a vital role in shaping how APs approach discipline. Though discipline policies may be standardized, APs exercise flexibility in how they engage with students based on trust and familiarity. Research shows that when students feel valued and understood, they are more likely to accept disciplinary consequences as fair, reducing the likelihood of repeated infractions (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014).

District Policy. The second major factor influencing discipline decisions was district policy. Participants expressed a range of perspectives on how policies affected their ability to make equitable disciplinary decisions. Jackson Glisson acknowledged that though APs must adhere to district policies, their primary focus should remain on building relationships and providing the necessary support to students and families. His reflections align with research that showed rigid policies alone are insufficient for fostering equitable discipline outcomes and that school leaders must actively interpret and apply policies in ways that consider student well-being (Carter Andrews et al., 2019;

Skiba et al., 2014). Israel Little emphasized that repeated suspensions failed to address the underlying issues, a concern supported by research on exclusionary discipline's disproportionate harm to students of color (Gregory et al., 2010; Khalifa, 2018). He advocated for restorative interventions that focus on root causes. Similarly, Melinda Plaza highlighted the importance of flexibility within district policies. Though educators must follow established behavior codes, she emphasized that there was often a gray area that allowed administrators to make decisions that served the best interests of students. Research supports this perspective, indicating discretionary discipline policies that allow for administrator judgment can lead to more equitable outcomes when guided by culturally responsive leadership (Milner, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Morris Polk critiqued district policies for failing to address the systemic biases that disproportionately affect certain student groups. He cited research on how Black female students face disproportionately high discipline rates compared to their White female peers, calling for a shift from mere acknowledgment of the issue to tangible policy reform (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Crenshaw, 1989). His reflections align with studies highlighting the need for ongoing equity audits to assess and mitigate bias in school discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2014). Kate Dart took a direct stance against a policy she deemed harmful, the enforcement of the hood rule, which she observed disproportionately affected Black and Brown boys. Her decision to deprioritize this policy in favor of focusing on more meaningful student engagement aligns with studies that showed minor dress code infractions are often used to police students of color disproportionately, contributing to exclusionary discipline disparities (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Love, 2019).

Kay Holmes criticized policies restricting students with disciplinary records from vocational courses, calling this a social justice issue. She argued that removing students from traditional settings should not block access to career pathways, aligning with research advocating for strengths-based discipline (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Milner, 2020). Conversely, Craig Tetter adhered closely to district guidelines when determining disciplinary consequences. His emphasis on following a progressive discipline model where repeated infractions resulted in escalated responses reflected a compliance-based approach that ensured consistency but could limit flexibility in addressing individual student needs. Though structured discipline frameworks can help maintain order, research shows strict adherence to policy without considering student context can perpetuate racial disparities in school discipline (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2014).

Summary. Finding 6 highlights the complexity of school discipline decision making, demonstrating that APs must navigate the intersection of relational factors and district policies to ensure equitable student outcomes. Relational trust enables APs to better understand student needs and personalize their approach to discipline, whereas district policies establish structured frameworks that administrators must follow. The challenge lies in balancing both elements to ensure fairness, accountability, and student support. Moving forward, school district leaders should implement equity-centered discipline training to help APs apply policies fairly and minimize harm. Research shows PD in culturally responsive discipline reduces racial disparities in school discipline outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010; Milner, 2020). Additionally, district leaders should conduct regular equity audits of discipline policies to identify and address systemic

biases. Transparency in discipline data can help school leaders adjust policies to ensure they do not disproportionately affect marginalized student groups (Skiba et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework Application

The theoretical framework for this study integrates sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2007), and transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). Table 2 provides an overview of how each finding and its associated themes explicitly connect to these theoretical components. Sensemaking theory specifically offers insights into how APs interpret and respond to disciplinary processes, particularly concerning the racial discipline gap (see Table 2). Each sensemaking tenet, expanded and summarized below, is illustrated with participant quotes from Chapter 4.

Social Justice Identity Construction

Adapted for this study, the integration of sensemaking, social justice leadership, and transformative leadership theories significantly informs how social justice identity construction is conceptualized and understood. This theory provides a structured lens to explore the dynamic, reflective process through which APs develop their identities as SJLs. It emphasizes that identity is continuously evolving through personal reflection, professional experiences, and social interactions within educational settings. These theories underline that the identities of SJLs are profoundly shaped by their lived experiences, professional roles, and societal contexts, guiding their advocacy and responses to inequities. APs reflect on their personal histories, professional roles, cultural backgrounds, and societal contexts to interpret and address complex disciplinary scenarios effectively. Morris Polk emphasized his identity as a Black male as central to his advocacy, noting, “I identify as a Black male, and so my personal lived experiences

have shaped how I advocate specifically for male students but also Black male students." Similarly, Melinda Plaza drew from her experiences as a minority and low-income student, leveraging these insights to thoughtfully respond to educational inequities, reflecting, "Just my own personal experiences in where and how I grew up . . . and the things that I've experienced as a minority low-income student myself and the opportunities that did not exist for me."

Retrospective

The retrospective aspect of sensemaking underscores the importance of reflecting upon past experiences to inform and guide present interpretations and actions. This tenet illustrates how APs actively draw upon their previous professional experiences, historical knowledge, and observed patterns to make sense of current disciplinary challenges. This reflective process helps APs discern underlying issues, recognize recurring patterns, and implement informed interventions. Bud Baker captured this reflective nature, stating, "Over the past 5 or 6 years, I've seen how young Black men are suspended far more often for the same behaviors as others, which truly opened my eyes." Similarly, Kay Holmes referenced her past teaching experiences, which highlighted stark contrasts in educational opportunities, motivating her ongoing commitment to equity, noting, "Teaching middle school, I was struck by the contrast to my predominantly White upbringing . . . I wanted to help students who couldn't access the curriculum."

Enactive of the Environment

Sensemaking as enactive of the environment emphasizes that individuals shape their surroundings through actions, resulting in environments that subsequently influence their sensemaking process. APs proactively engage with their school environments,

establishing disciplinary practices and policies that frame future possibilities or constraints. Israel Little provided a notable example of such environmental engagement, describing proactive measures addressing students' environmental contexts such as gang affiliations:

> We have to be culturally aware of where our students are from and what gangs they may be affiliated with . . . our staff pay attention to drill rap in the city because several of our students have been victims mentioned in these songs.

Craig Tetter further illustrated this by highlighting his school's commitment to restorative discipline, stating, "The school's goal focuses on a progressive, restorative discipline approach, aiming to keep students in school rather than suspending them."

Social

The social dimension of sensemaking underscores the influence of interpersonal interactions and collective dialogue in shaping interpretations and responses. The APs navigate disciplinary issues through collaboration and communication with various stakeholders, including families, teachers, and community partners. Jackson Glisson highlighted the critical role of social interactions, emphasizing, "It's so important for restorative conversations to take place between not only the individuals involved but also their families . . . Breaking down gaps is key—being transparent with families about the things we're working on as a school." Myrtle Hill similarly acknowledged the importance of community collaboration by mentioning involvement with a supportive local judge, stating, "We have a local judge who is very supportive of the students and the schools. We involve him in various activities, like speaking to our kids about issues."

Ongoing

Ongoing sensemaking highlights that interpretation and decision making are perpetual, dynamic processes without definitive starting or ending points. This continual

refinement of understanding allows APs to adapt and respond to constantly evolving educational landscapes and disciplinary circumstances. Viola Rowse described the persistent nature of her role, noting, “My current role requires a lot of listening and analyzing people . . . Being strategic, listening better, and understanding what the fight is and what the need is are crucial.” Kate Dart reinforced this idea by emphasizing her daily commitment to supporting students, stating, “Every day I work with students, I see that they need someone who supports them, advocates for them, cheers them on, and encourages them.”

Focused on and by Extracted Cues

Sensemaking guided by extracted cues involves identifying specific signals or pieces of evidence that become central to interpreting situations and guiding subsequent actions. APs rely on critical indicators, such as patterns of behavior, teacher reports, and physical evidence, to inform their disciplinary decisions. Andrea Blake detailed her reliance on cues, particularly a teacher’s past reliability, by stating, “One factor I consider is the teacher’s track record . . . If a teacher frequently provides information that doesn’t pan out, I take that into account.” Clara Romero similarly described using direct cues such as video footage to guide her investigations, noting, “Cameras are my first line of defense when I can use them . . . By interviewing [students] one-on-one, I can usually connect the dots.”

Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy

Sensemaking driven by plausibility underscores the preference for credible interpretations within complex disciplinary contexts, recognizing the necessity of reasonable judgments in uncertain situations. This approach allows APs to maintain

functionality and coherence in disciplinary practices despite inherent ambiguities. Jake Tuttle emphasized this plausible approach, noting, “My experience and exposure have taught me to be open to all sides . . . we’re in an environment where our Black students are disciplined more frequently than their peers.” Bud Baker similarly reflected, “Truth is in the eye of the beholder . . . Everybody’s truth looks different . . . sometimes I do have to rely on video because unfortunately, video does not lie.” APs, therefore, navigate disciplinary scenarios by weighing varying perspectives, leveraging their professional judgment, and employing strategies that ensure fair and equitable outcomes. In conclusion, applying sensemaking theory, coupled with social justice and transformative leadership frameworks, provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how APs navigate disciplinary complexities. This integrated approach not only elucidates how APs interpret and manage disciplinary situations but also highlights their strategies for addressing systemic inequities and promoting equitable disciplinary practices. Ultimately, the integration of these theoretical perspectives underscores the pivotal role APs play in fostering inclusive school environments, actively confronting biases, and advancing social justice through their leadership and daily practices.

Clarification of the Intersection of Findings and Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study are deeply rooted in the theoretical frameworks of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), social justice leadership (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007), and transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). Specifically, sensemaking theory provides a foundational lens through which the APs’ interpretation of disciplinary practices and identity formation as social justice leaders can be understood. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is an ongoing, retrospective, social process driven by plausibility

rather than accuracy. This theory explicitly informs how APs continuously interpret disciplinary practices, engage in reflective practice about systemic inequities, and make meaning of their roles as change agents within their educational settings.

The intersection with social justice leadership theory further elucidates how APs enact their social justice identities through actions that explicitly aim to dismantle systemic barriers, advocate for marginalized students, and foster inclusive environments. This study confirms Theoharis's (2007) assertion that SJLs actively challenge inequitable systems through both structural reform and relational advocacy. Furman's (2012) emphasis on reflective practice is evident in how APs continually assess and recalibrate their actions to remain aligned with social justice principles.

Finally, transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010) significantly intersects with the findings, particularly in the APs' proactive efforts to engage in courageous conversations, challenge inequities, and implement culturally responsive discipline practices. Transformative leadership theory complements sensemaking and social justice leadership by providing a practical and ideological framework for actions that address systemic injustices head-on.

By clarifying the intersection of these three theoretical frameworks, this study enhances the understanding of the complex, dynamic processes by which APs develop social justice identities, make sense of disciplinary practices, and actively work toward closing the racial discipline gap. Integrating these theoretical lenses offers a robust foundation for interpreting the findings and strengthens the study's contributions to leadership practices aimed at achieving equity and social justice in education.

Revised Conceptual Framework

The revised conceptual framework (see Figure 3) builds upon the original by incorporating insights from the study's findings to offer a clearer, more dynamic, and action-oriented understanding of how APs work to reduce the racial discipline gap in urban Title I schools. Several key developments distinguish this revised framework from the original design, emphasizing leadership identity development as a core driver of systemic equity work.

Introduction of Social Identity Construction

A central contribution of this study is the introduction and integration of social justice identity construction, a construct informed by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). Social justice identity construction conceptualizes the development of a professional leadership identity grounded in advocacy, cultural responsiveness, and transformative activism. Unlike traditional applications of social identity theory, which focus on group membership and intergroup relations, this adapted construct emphasizes APs' self-categorization processes, internalization of justice-oriented norms, and the profound influence these processes have on disciplinary decisions and advocacy actions. Sensemaking theory is adapted to illustrate how APs continuously interpret complex disciplinary situations, construct narratives of fairness, and sustain their commitment to equity.

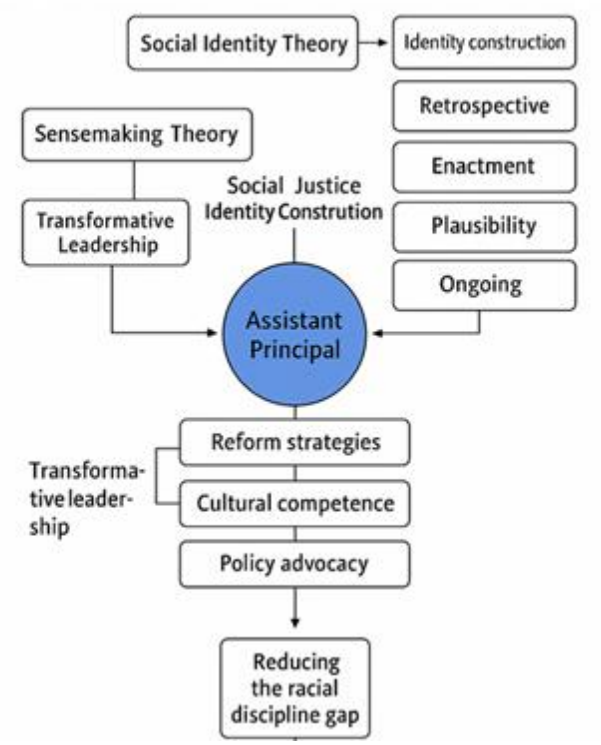
Critically, this framework establishes a developmental trajectory in which identity construction precedes and enables transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). APs' social justice identities, shaped through relational sensemaking and critical reflection, become catalysts for transformative reform strategies, explicitly including restorative practices,

cultural competence, and policy advocacy. These strategies are direct expressions of APs' internalized commitment to equity rather than mere technical interventions (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Additionally, the revised framework broadens the scope by incorporating intersectional aspects such as race, class, and disability, reflecting the complexities faced by APs in urban Title I schools (K. J. Banks, 2018). This broader perspective underscores the necessity of culturally responsive leadership practices informed by identity and lived experience. It recognizes that APs must continuously engage with and critically reflect upon their own identities, biases, and privileges to authentically and effectively address the diverse needs of their student populations.

Figure 3

Sensemaking, Social Justice Identity Construction, and Transformative Leadership Revised



The updated conceptual model visually represents the interplay among social identity theory, sensemaking theory, and transformative leadership theory. These theories converge within social justice identity construction, depicted as an active and ongoing developmental process foundational to AP leadership. Identity construction involves retrospective reflection, enactment of equitable practices, plausible decision making in complex contexts, and an ongoing commitment to personal and professional growth. This social justice identity drives targeted reform strategies: restorative practices to promote reconciliation, cultural competence to ensure disciplinary fairness across diverse student

populations, and policy advocacy to structurally address systemic inequities. These strategies manifest through AP responsibilities such as managing discipline referrals, coaching teachers in culturally responsive practices, and actively engaging families to strengthen school-community partnerships.

Collectively, these strategies lead directly to the intended outcome: significantly reducing the racial discipline gap. The model explicitly outlines a clear developmental pathway, beginning with identity construction, advancing through strategic transformative actions, and culminating in systemic equity outcomes. The conceptual framework underscores the necessity of APs continually revisiting and reflecting upon their social justice identities to ensure sustained equity-driven discipline practices.

Summary

This revised conceptual framework provides a theoretically grounded, actionable model for understanding APs' engagement in equity-driven discipline reform. By emphasizing social justice identity construction and practical reform strategies, this framework enhances the study's contributions to educational leadership scholarship. It underscores transformative leadership as a product of sustained reflection, relational trust, and critical engagement with systemic inequities, aligning with Shields's (2018) vision for leaders committed to actively dismantling systemic barriers through inclusive, equitable practices. Ultimately, this framework serves as both a theoretical foundation and practical guide for educational leaders committed to fostering restorative, inclusive, and socially just school environments.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the critical role APs play in shaping equitable discipline practices. Given their frontline position in discipline enforcement, APs must be equipped with the tools and knowledge they need to challenge systemic disparities and implement inclusive approaches to discipline. Research has consistently demonstrated that racial disparities in school discipline disproportionately affect Black and Brown students, contributing to negative academic and social outcomes. These disparities are often reinforced by zero tolerance policies, implicit bias, and a lack of culturally responsive approaches to discipline.

As school leaders strive to create more equitable learning environments, APs must act as change agents who advocate for and implement reforms that address structural inequities. This requires an intentional shift away from punitive disciplinary models toward restorative justice practices that prioritize relationship building and conflict resolution. Furthermore, school leadership teams must engage in continuous professional learning and equity audits to ensure discipline policies are applied fairly and consistently across all student populations.

This section outlines the implications of the study's findings for practitioners, policymakers, and educational researchers. It offers targeted recommendations to support equity-driven disciplinary reforms. By embedding these recommendations into school systems, leaders can work toward dismantling systemic inequities and fostering a more just and inclusive educational landscape.

Practitioners

The findings emphasize the need for expanded PD on equity centered discipline. Learning should focus on implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching, and restorative justice. Research indicates training in these areas results in more equitable discipline outcomes and improved student behavior (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Khalifa, 2018). To ensure lasting change, school leaders should integrate these trainings into ongoing professional learning efforts, fostering a culture of continuous reflection and growth (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

University training programs for APs must play a vital role in addressing these needs. Leadership preparation programs should integrate coursework and experiential learning opportunities that focus on culturally responsive practices, restorative justice, and systems thinking (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Khalifa, 2018). These programs should also prioritize the development of a social justice identity by encouraging APs to examine how their beliefs, experiences, and biases influence their leadership. Reflective practice is essential in nurturing this identity, promoting leaders who are both culturally responsive and morally grounded (Furman, 2012; Shields, 2018).

To move beyond isolated workshops or compliance-based equity trainings, PD must be reimagined as a sustained and systemic process embedded within the daily rhythms of the school. This approach calls for multiple layers of support, including job embedded coaching, reflective inquiry cycles, and leadership modeling of equity practices. Schools should establish monthly equity focused professional learning communities where teachers, APs, and student support staff collaboratively analyze discipline data, examine case studies of racialized incidents, and co construct culturally

responsive and restorative solutions. Leadership teams should also use action-oriented tools such as equity walkthroughs, structured feedback protocols, and critical reflection journals to ensure professional learning leads to observable shifts in classroom and schoolwide practices.

Moreover, to align with research-based prevention models such as the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) recommendations and Wilson's (2014) prevention measures, PD must integrate the development of supportive relationships, bias aware classrooms, culturally relevant instruction, and MTSS. Rather than responding to disciplinary incidents after they occur, PD must prepare educators to proactively build environments that reduce exclusionary practices. Regular analysis of discipline data, ongoing equity audits, and collaborative inquiry cycles should become central to leadership and instructional improvement processes.

In addition, districts should create cross role professional learning cohorts that bring together teachers, APs, principals, counselors, and other staff to engage in inquiry around race, power, discipline, and equity. Collaborative and role spanning learning experiences strengthen collective efficacy and ensure the equity work is shared across the school community. Sustained and iterative cycles of learning, practice, reflection, and adjustment are essential to support the ongoing development of equity-minded leadership.

Leadership programs should continue to offer hands-on experiences with restorative practices such as facilitating restorative circles and mediating student teacher conflicts. Evidence supports that restorative approaches reduce suspension rates and improve school climates (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Lustick, 2017). Furthermore, training

APs to conduct equity audits of discipline data is critical for promoting accountability and identifying disparities that require targeted interventions (Skiba et al., 2014; Skrla et al., 2009).

Another important recommendation is strengthening partnerships between schools and communities. School leaders should build meaningful collaborations with families and community organizations to promote student well-being (J. L. Epstein, 2011). Leadership preparation programs should equip APs with strategies to engage families as active partners in the educational process. Research shows such engagement reduces discipline disparities and fosters trust between schools and communities (Ishimaru, 2020).

Finally, schools should establish discipline review teams composed of APs, teachers, and student support staff to review referrals and ensure consistency and fairness in discipline decisions (Gay, 2018). These teams play an important role in promoting equitable and unbiased implementation of discipline policies. Regular meetings should include the review of disaggregated discipline data to identify trends and implement targeted interventions aligned with a multi-tiered framework.

By embedding equity centered principles into professional learning, leadership preparation, and continuous school-based inquiry, and by prioritizing the development of a social justice identity, APs can be empowered to lead transformative discipline reform. These efforts are essential for creating inclusive learning environments that address the root causes of behavioral disparities and support all students.

Policymakers

The findings highlight the need for systemic policy reforms that promote equitable discipline practices. Participants in this study acknowledged challenges associated with zero tolerance policies and emphasized the benefits of approaches that address the root causes of student behavior (K. R. Evans & Lester, 2013). Though they were not advocating for a universal approach, participants emphasized the importance of providing administrators with the discretion to make context sensitive decisions while maintaining structures of accountability (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Embedding social justice leadership into licensure and professional standards is a critical policy consideration. Although most frameworks are currently written for principals, the responsibilities of APs, particularly in discipline, warrant their own equity focused standards. Policymakers should develop or adapt frameworks that reflect the specific needs and influence of APs, ensuring the development of a social justice identity becomes a central leadership competency (Khalifa, 2018; Shields, 2018).

District leaders should also be supported in integrating social justice principles into leadership development programs. Research shows equity-centered leadership training enhances administrators' ability to lead systemic change and promote inclusive school cultures (Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2007). In addition, conducting regular district wide equity audits can help identify patterns of disparity and assess the effectiveness of restorative policies (Skiba et al., 2014).

Policymakers should also revisit exclusionary policies that limit access to academic opportunities for students with disciplinary records. Participants noted such

policies disproportionately affect students from historically marginalized groups, restricting access to vocational and advanced learning opportunities. Creating inclusive policies that ensure equitable access to academic and career pathways is essential to disrupting cycles of punishment and disengagement (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Milner, 2020). By implementing these reforms, policymakers can support schools in shifting from punitive systems to restorative, equity centered frameworks that foster academic success and holistic student development.

Educational Researchers and Future Directions

This study provides a foundation for future research on discipline disparities and equity-driven leadership, especially in relation to the evolving role of APs. As APs frequently serve as the primary actors in school discipline, their experiences offer unique insights into both barriers and opportunities for advancing equity. Researchers should examine how APs develop and enact a social justice identity, particularly within institutional structures that may constrain or support this development (Khalifa, 2018; Shields, 2018).

One promising area for future study is the longitudinal impact of leadership preparation and PD on APs' identity formation. Research should explore which elements, such as mentorship, reflective practice, and critical incident analysis, most effectively contribute to the development of equity centered leadership (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Future research should also examine the forms of resistance APs face when advocating for equity-based reforms. Understanding how APs navigate internal and external opposition can inform strategies for leadership resilience and help strengthen the implementation of equity policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Milner, 2020). Empirical studies

should assess the effectiveness of equity-focused PD on teacher behaviors and student discipline outcomes over time. This includes examining how restorative practices and anti-bias training shape school culture and contribute to long-term reductions in suspension and referral rates (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Another important area for exploration is the influence of geographic culture on discipline outcomes. Researchers should investigate how regional norms, such as those found in the Southern versus Northern United States, affect student–teacher relationships, identity alignment, and culturally responsive practices. This line of inquiry could inform region-specific strategies for PD and recruitment, especially in schools serving Black students (Ishimaru, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Finally, more attention must be given to the role of APs in existing leadership frameworks. As most standards are designed for principals, researchers should explore how APs interpret and enact these standards in ways that support or hinder equity work. Developing and validating role specific leadership frameworks could help better prepare APs to serve as equity champions within their schools. By addressing these areas, future research can deepen the understanding of how to prepare and support APs to lead systemic discipline reform and contribute to lasting, equity-driven change in education.

Conclusion

This study illuminated the critical role APs play in promoting equity within the discipline processes of urban Title I K–12 schools. By exploring how APs develop social justice identities, make sense of disciplinary disparities, and implement strategies to address systemic inequities, this study contributes new understanding to the field of educational leadership. Through a comprehensive analysis of participant narratives,

findings revealed that APs' social justice identities are deeply shaped by personal lived experiences, observed systemic inequities, and ongoing reflective practice. These identities are not static but continually constructed through critical reflection, meaning making, and advocacy-oriented leadership action. Central to this study was the introduction of the construct of social justice identity construction, adapted from social identity theory and sensemaking theory, providing a new lens through which to understand how APs cultivate equity-centered leadership practices.

Participants demonstrated that addressing the racial discipline gap requires more than technical compliance with discipline codes. It demands courageous, equity-driven leadership that challenges implicit biases, transforms punitive discipline practices into growth opportunities, and advocates for systemic policy reform. APs' ability to engage in reflective dialogue, leverage restorative practices, conduct equity audits, and build relational trust with students, families, and teachers emerged as vital strategies in advancing inclusive and just school environments.

The revised conceptual framework presented in this study positions social justice identity construction as the foundation for transformative leadership. It emphasizes that leadership for discipline equity is rooted in deeply internalized social justice values, enacted through critical sensemaking and informed by restorative, culturally responsive practices. Transformative leadership, as depicted in the updated model, grows out of this identity work and represents a sustained commitment to dismantling systemic inequities at both the structural and relational levels within schools.

Though this study affirms the potential for APs to drive systemic change, it also highlights significant challenges. Constraints within district policies, teacher resistance,

and entrenched structural inequities present ongoing barriers to reform. Nevertheless, APs who intentionally develop their social justice identities and leverage culturally responsive, restorative leadership practices demonstrate powerful capacity to close discipline gaps and foster equitable learning environments. In conclusion, APs' leadership journeys reflect the dynamic and relational nature of equity work in education. Their efforts underscore that meaningful discipline reform is inseparable from identity work, critical reflection, and a steadfast commitment to justice. Preparing and supporting APs through targeted PD, equity-centered leadership preparation programs, and systemic supports is essential for sustaining transformative change. By centering social justice in leadership practice, APs can serve as pivotal agents of educational equity, ensuring all students are seen, valued, and empowered to succeed.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. I am a doctoral candidate at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, and I am conducting research on the Assistant Principal on promoting the needs of all students by closing the racial gap within school exclusionary practices. In our interview today, I would like to discuss several topics, pertaining mostly to your most recent experiences with systemic racial disparities in school discipline practices. You were selected to participate in this study because you met the study criteria. There will be one interview held and each interview should last about 45-60 minutes.

Your name, location, and school will be kept confidential and will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study. Pseudonyms will be used for your name, your location, and your school when results of the study are reported. Additionally, the sample includes several participants holding the same position as you which further protects and shields your identity.

I will be recording our interview today for purposes of transcription. Your recording will not be used in any publication or presentation. The files containing the recording will be de-identified as soon as possible. The document that links the pseudonyms to names, locations, and schools will be kept in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer.

Pre-Interview Demographic Questions:

1. Please share your leadership journey.
2. Please share your educational values and describe how they guide your leadership on campus.
    a. Did you hold any positions between the time you were a teacher and AP? If so, what positions?
    b. How did that/those positions shape your leadership?
2. What percentage of your workday would you estimate is spent dealing with student discipline or managing student behavior?
    a. Describe the type and level of discipline that are most common.
3. What is your philosophy on student discipline?

a. Were there factors that influenced your disciplinary philosophy?

4. Please describe your school climate?
5. Please describe your school's behavior plan? Does this plan assist in the decrease of student behavior?
6. Using the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model of Adult Skills Acquisition, how would you describe your current level of comfort and proficiency as an Assistant Principal (AP) in leading social justice initiatives? Do you see yourself as (Honken, 2013):

    a. A **Novice**, relying heavily on clear guidelines and structured support to navigate social justice issues?
    b. An **Advanced Beginner**, starting to recognize patterns and context but still needing guidance?
    c. **Competent**, with the ability to plan, make decisions, and take initiative in social justice leadership with some independence?
    d. **Proficient**, where you have a deep understanding and can intuitively adapt to complex social justice situations?
    e. Or an **Expert**, where your knowledge and intuition allow you to lead social justice efforts effortlessly, innovate strategies, and mentor others in this work?

Interview Questions:

1. How do you define being a social justice leader (SJL)? **(Identity Construction)**
    a. When did you make this realization? **(Identity Construction)**
    b. What characteristics of being an SJL do you identify with the most? Why? **(Identity Construction)**

c. What past experiences have shaped your advocacy for social justice issues? **(Retrospective)**

d. What empowers you to do this work?

2. What is your perspective on the racial discipline gap?

    a. What do you believe are the contributing factors to the racial discipline gap? **(Extracted Cues)**

    b. Is there a racial discipline gap on your campus? Why or Why not?

3. Why do you believe students of color are overrepresented in the use of exclusionary discipline practices?

    a. Do cultural differences and diversity factor into student discipline concerns on your campus? Why or why not? **(Extracted Cues)**

    b. As an SJL, how does your professional practice influence the use of exclusionary discipline on your campus? **(Identity Construction)**

4. How do teachers on your campus communicate their understanding or lack of understanding of understanding of the racial discipline gap?

    a. How do you engage teachers in social justice-oriented conversations to advance equity? **(Enactment)**

    b. What barriers do you face when attempting to advocate for social justice on your campus? How do you contend with the challenges? **(Enactment)**

5. Walk me through your thought process when you begin evaluating a discipline incident or referral with a student.

    a. What do you consider about the referring teacher? **(Extracted Cues)**

    b. What do you consider about students being referred? **(Extracted Cues)**

c. What do you consider about the nature of the discipline infraction? **(Extracted Cues)**

d. Do you consider any environmental or contextual factors? **(Extracted Cues)**

6. What is your goal when investigating a discipline or referral concern?
    a. What level of understanding are you seeking to gain about the discipline issue? **(Plausibility)**
    b. How does your perception change as your learn more about the incident as the investigation progresses? **(Ongoing)**
7. Please tell me about how you determine a student's disciplinary consequence?
    a. How do you interpret policy when defining disciplinary consequences for students? **(Enactment)**
    b. Do you have any latitude when determining the disciplinary consequence for student infractions? If so, how do you use this autonomy? **(Enactment)**
8. Please describe how you determine the truth about a student discipline issue? Please tell me about how you judge your accuracy?
    a. How has your accuracy at determining the truth evolved since you became an AP? **(Retrospective)**
    b. What factors or events have shaped your ability to accurately determine the truth about discipline issues? **(Retrospective)**
9. Describe your feelings when you make the disciplinary decision to exclude a student from the learning environment. **(Identity Construction)**

a. Are the feelings different depending on the type of exclusionary discipline decision (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, disciplinary alternative education program, expulsion)? Explain.
b. Are the feelings different depending on the student who is receiving the consequence? **(Social)** Explain.

10. When making difficult disciplinary decisions, do you consider relational factors? **(Social)** Explain.
    a. Have you ever had to make the disciplinary decision to exclude a student from the learning environment whose success you were heavily invested in? **(Social)** How did that affect you?
    b. Have teachers ever criticized your disciplinary decisions? **(Social)** If so, how did that make you feel? How did you react?
11. Describe your emotions when talking to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of a student when you make the disciplinary decision to exclude a student from the learning environment. **(Social)**
    a. Do parent(s)/guardian(s) ever feel that you have been unfair to their child? **(Social)** If so, how did this make you feel?
    b. Have you ever felt unjustly characterized by the parent(s)/guardian(s) of a student due to your disciplinary decision to exclude a student from the learning environment? **(Social)** If so, how did this make you feel?
12. Do you consider if/how your disciplinary decisions connect to the racial discipline gap? **(Enactment)**

a. Describe your feelings related to your level of perceived influence on the racial discipline gap. **(Identity Construction)**
b. Describe what the level of importance that you place to combating the racial discipline gap in comparison to other contemporary educational issues.
c. What barriers have you faced have with reducing the racial discipline gap in your school?

Post Interview Questions:

1. Is there anything you'd like to add to what you've told me?
2. Is there anything you'd like to tell me that I didn't ask you about?
3. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Interview Questions by Research Questions

RQ1: How do APs develop a social justice identity?	#1, #2, #3
RQ2: How do APs self-identified as social justice leaders make sense of and work toward closing the racial discipline gap, if at all? a. What actions and/or strategies, if any, do APs use to close the racial discipline gap and systemic barriers within school discipline?	#4, #9, #10, #11, #12
RQ3: How do APs make sense of the disciplinary process within their schools? a. What are the factors that influence APs' sensemaking of the discipline process?	#5, #6, #7, #8

Appendix C: Demographic & Background Information Collection Sheet

Please provide the following demographic information. This information will not be connected to your name or school/school district. This form is voluntary; you may choose not to answer any or all of the questions on this form.

Participant Code: (To be completed by sub investigator) _____

Race & Ethnicity:

Unspecified

American Indian/Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin

Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin

Age (Circle One)	Gender (Circle One)
20-30	Female
31-40	Male
41-50	Unspecified

51-60

61-70

Current Position Title:

Years of Experience in Current Position:

Years of Experience in Education:

Highest Degree Attained:

1. How long have you been in the field of education?
2. How long have you been an assistant principal?
3. How long have you been at this school and what have been all of your roles at this school?
4. Why did you decide to become an AP?

5. What did your Educational Leadership master's degree or Administrative Certification program teach you about student discipline?
    a. What have you learned about student discipline since being in the field?
    b. How did you learn these things?

6. What did your Educational Leadership master's degree or Administrative Certification program teach you about social justice and equity?

7. In your time as an AP, have you had any professional learning or training in the area of social justice and equity? If yes, please describe.

8. Do you identify yourself a Leader for Social Justice and Equity?

9. Using the Dreyfus Five-Stage Model of Adult Skills Acquisition (Honken, 2013), how would you describe your current level of comfort and proficiency as an Assistant Principal (AP) in leading social justice initiatives? Do you see yourself as:

    a. A **Novice**, relying heavily on clear guidelines and structured support to navigate social justice issues?
    b. An **Advanced Beginner**, starting to recognize patterns and context but still needing guidance?
    c. **Competent**, with the ability to plan, make decisions, and take initiative in social justice leadership with some independence?
    d. **Proficient**, where you have a deep understanding and can intuitively adapt to complex social justice situations?
    e. Or an **Expert**, where your knowledge and intuition allow you to lead social justice efforts effortlessly, innovate strategies, and mentor others in this work?

Appendix D: Excerpt of Codebook

Theme	Category	Sample Code	Participant Quote
Development of social justice identity through personal and professional experiences	Personal and observed experiences	"Diverse environments reshaped understanding of fairness."	"Being in diverse environments reshaped my understanding of education and my role in promoting fairness." (Barclay Bond)
Structural inequities contributing to the racial discipline gap	Resource disparities	"Special education inequities across communities."	"Disparities in resources and special education designations show stark contrasts between affluent and lower-income communities." (Israel Little)
Implicit bias impacting disciplinary decisions	Stereotyping	"Bias toward Black girls' maturity and Black boys as misfits."	"Misconceptions that Black girls mature faster or Black boys are inherently misfits profoundly affect disciplinary actions." (Jessica Meyer)
Deficiency in cultural competence among educators	Cultural misunderstanding	"Teachers misinterpret culturally specific expressions."	"Teachers often misinterpret students' culturally specific expressions, leading to unnecessary discipline." (Clara Romero)

Appendix E: Informed Consent for Participation in a Research Study

Title of Study: Assistant Principals as Social Justice Leaders Closing the Racial Gap From Exclusionary Discipline Practices

IRB #: NCR213914

Researcher: Adaarema Kelly, Ed.S

Principal Investigator Name: Dr. Jennifer Clayton, PhD

Version Date: 12/3/2021

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Clayton of the Department of Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University (GWU). Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. Further information regarding this study may be obtained by contacting Adaarema Kelly, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Administration program at The George Washington University, who is conducting this research as her dissertation study. She may be reached by telephone at (571) 383-4598 or by email at adaaremakelly@gwu.edu.

The purpose of this study is to understand APs make sense of the discipline process within their schools, and the actions employed to promote the needs of all students by closing the racial gap within exclusionary discipline practices. Through interviews, we will explore the practices and perceptions of assistant principals who work closely with historically marginalized populations.

What are the reasons you might not choose to volunteer for this study? You may have a concern regarding loss of confidentiality, or you may have time limitations. Minimal risks to the participants are anticipated by participating in this study; however, if

a participant becomes uncomfortable at any time the participant may stop the interview. As a participant in this study, you may withdraw at any time.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview that will last approximately 60-75 minutes. The interview will occur via a virtual platform and will be recorded. Participants will be asked to discuss their experiences with leadership coaching and the leadership practices, if any, that they believe they tried as a result of leadership coaching. This perception is subjective and specific to the individual participant. In addition to the interview, participants will complete a short form that will collect demographic information as well as basic information about the school that they lead. Once the interview has ended, the recording will be transcribed. This transcription will be emailed to you for your review. At that time, you may offer any corrections and/or additions as needed. The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is approximately 90-180 minutes. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may stop your participation in this study at any time.

Possible risks or discomforts you could experience during this study include:

- Possible loss of confidentiality
- Possible discussion of uncomfortable topics during the interview

Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, however, this cannot be guaranteed. All identifying information, including names, location, and name of school will be removed from the transcription and pseudonyms will be used in their places. Additionally, all transcripts as well as pseudonym codes will be kept in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. If results of this research

study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified.

The Office of Human Research of George Washington University, at telephone number (202) 994-2715, can provide further information about your rights as a research participant. To ensure anonymity your signature is not required, unless you prefer to sign it. Your willingness to participate in this research study is implied if you proceed.

*Please keep a copy of this document in case you want to read it again