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Defining Defiance: African-American Middle School Students' Perspective on the Impact of Teachers' Disciplinary Referrals

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by

Patricia Ray

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ABSTRACT

Defining Defiance: African-American Middle School Students' Perspective on the Impact of Teachers' Disciplinary Referrals

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The purpose of this study is to understand how African-American males enrolled in middle school in Los Angeles County experienced and understood the application of the California educational code regarding discipline. Disproportionate numbers of African-American students are being suspended and expelled from public schools. This overreliance on exclusionary punishment has led to the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and the statistics related to suspension rates from school mirror that of the criminal justice system. This study captures the voices of students who are consistently referred to the office by classroom teachers in order to understand how they perceive and articulate their experiences with the school disciplinary process and how those experiences impact their academic and personal lives. Findings indicate that participants want to do well in school. The participants described many of the behaviors that triggered an office referral as trivial, such as being tardy to class, talking, or not doing their work. When their infractions were more serious, students stated that they acted out because the teacher had

disrespected or antagonized them. More than anything, participants want teachers to listen to them and to respect them, and they want to be active participants in their learning.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need to be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and working, transform the world. (Freire, 1970, p. 27)

This quote embodies the reason I became an educator. After college, I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and moved from the suburbs of Southern California to New York City. I worked in a soup kitchen in Brooklyn for one year, and then as a community organizer in the Bronx for several years. Through both of these experiences, I realized that as a White woman I had come from a background of privilege, and that systemic changes were needed in order to make our society more just and equitable. I thought that I could affect that kind of change from the classroom, and I began teaching at a Catholic school in the South Bronx.

In my current role as the assistant principal of a large, public middle school in a diverse urban community, student discipline is a major responsibility of mine. On average, I see 20 to 30 students with discipline referrals per week. On too many occasions to count, I have been dismayed to see the chairs outside of my office filled with African-American males waiting to see me, with a discipline referral in hand.

Before beginning this study, I had been aware of the data regarding the disproportionate rates of suspension for African-American students (Losen, Gillespie, & University of California, 2012; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997), but I was not fully aware of the consequences of multiple suspensions and had not heard of the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Fabelo et al., 2011).

As an elementary school teacher and administrator for many years, I did not see first-hand the consequences that are associated with suspension and expulsion.

The importance of this problem was made painfully clear to me when I began my current middle school assignment in 2012. More and more, I see students of color, and African-American males in particular, who have been suspended multiple times, and who are giving up on academics. They see the school as having given up on them, and they are disengaged from scholarship and turning to risky behaviors such as truancy, violence, and drug and alcohol use.

In October of 2013, the Juvenile Court Schools of Los Angeles County requested the transcripts of four students who had attended my school during the 2012-2013 school year. I do not know what happened or why they were referred to Juvenile Court, but I do know that all four students are African-American boys. Each one had received numerous disciplinary referrals, and each one had been suspended several times the previous year. The data, both at my school site and nationally, are staggering. African-American students are four times more likely than their White peers to receive a discipline referral (Skiba et al., 2011) and three times more likely to be suspended from school (Tobin & Vincent, 2011).

Now that I have names and faces to attach to that data, the problem has become that much more real and personal to me. The problem is even more real and personal for the students who are involved in the disciplinary process. Therefore, this research study was designed to give voice to those most affected by this problem: African-American boys.

California Education Code

California kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) public schools are responsible for complying with the California Education Code (EC), which is comprehensive and governs

everything from the election of local school board members to daily instructional minutes and student discipline. EC §48900 outlines the allowable grounds for student suspension and expulsion, and subsection (k) allows students to be suspended or expelled if they have "disrupted school activities or otherwise willfully defied the valid authority" of school personnel (California Education Code [EC], 2009). Behaviors that are considered defiant can range from refusing to remove a hat or sit in an assigned seat refusing to work, or not reporting to class. Forty-two percent of suspensions in California during the 2010-2011 school year fell into this broad and subjective category of defiance (Children Now, 2013).

Defiance, a subjective offense that is defined by the person who is being defied (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), is the largest identifiable category of disciplinary infraction in the State of California (California Department of Education [CDE] DataQuest, 2013). Typically, it is the classroom teacher who first encounters the defiant behavior. The teacher can choose to manage the behavior in the classroom or send the student to the administrator with a discipline referral. The Homewood School District (HSD and a pseudonym), where this study took place, sends the *Student Handbook of Rights and Responsibilities* home every year. Published in 2014, the handbook outlines the following consequences the site administrator can choose from when a student is sent to the office with a disciplinary referral: conference with the teacher, counselor, or administrator; detention; suspension; recommendation for expulsion; police report; police citation; or long-term opportunity class assignment. In making that decision, the administrator will consider factors such as the student's past behavior, length of time since the last problem, the student's attitude, and the severity of the problem.

Offense categories such as “defiance,” “disobedience” and “disrespect” are the most commonly used to suspend students nationwide (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). In California, 43% of all suspensions were for willful defiance in 2012-2013, and African-American students made up 6% of statewide enrollment, yet they comprised 19% of all willful defiant suspensions (CDE DataQuest, 2013). However, the term “defiance” is not clearly defined in education codes or in classrooms and schools. When students are given a discipline referral for defiance, they often report that they do not know what they did wrong. In my experience, students will often say things like, “I just asked my friend for a pencil,” or, “Everyone else was laughing too. I don’t know why she sent me out.”

In an attempt to encourage California public school administrators to prioritize the use of disciplinary measures other than suspension when dealing with behavior deemed to be defiant, California Assembly Member Dickenson introduced Assembly Bill 420 (AB 420) in February 2013. It was passed in January 2015 to amend section 48900 (k) of the California Education Code and, remove the phrase “willfully defied the valid authority” and allow suspension only for behavior that is “substantially disrupting the learning process,” only in grades four through 12, and only after the third offense of the school year (Children Now, 2013).

Politicians, researchers and practitioners are concerned with the over-use of discipline referrals and suspensions as a response to behavior that school personnel consider to be defiant in school. Rocque (2010) found that the students with the most needs were more likely to be disciplined rather than have their needs met. This tends to make matters worse rather than leading to improved behavior. It is imperative that more appropriate methods are discovered for

supporting teachers and students, while encouraging behavior that allows for all students to be successful in the classroom.

Discipline referrals and suspensions contribute to reduced learning opportunities for students of all races, but African-American males have been disproportionately singled out for punishment more frequently than their peers. In a review of one high school's annual discipline data, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that African Americans comprised 30% of population but received 58% of the referrals for defiance while White students comprised 37% of the population and received only 5% of the defiance referrals. Furthermore, 70% of the referrals written for African-American students were for defiance, as compared to 55% for White students.

Statement of the Problem

Disproportionate numbers of African-American students are receiving disciplinary referrals and being suspended from public schools (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). Defiance of authority is the primary reason for the majority of referrals and suspensions (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Raffaele-Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). Defiance is a subjective term, and often, it is not clearly defined at a school site. Acts of defiance can include behaviors such as refusing to remove a hat, failing to report to class, refusing to work, and talking back to the teacher. Because there is such a large range in behaviors, and the adult involved is the one who defines defiance, the consequences of defying authority may not always be applied justly (Iselin, 2010).

In the small urban school district in Los Angeles County where this study was conducted, African Americans comprised 21.6% of the student population yet accounted for 52% of all

suspensions at the time of data collection. In the 2011-2012 school year, 29.6% of suspensions for African Americans were for defiance, compared to 22.5% of all suspensions (CDE DataQuest, 2013).

Despite the fact that this problem has been documented for over 25 years (Skiba et al., 2011) and that there is little evidence supporting the effectiveness of suspension for improving student behavior (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), disproportionate rates of suspension for African-American students continue to be a problem in schools across the nation. Researchers and practitioners continue to explore whether the behavior of African-American students is such that it warrants more suspensions than their peers. Studies have shown that this is not the case. In an extensive review of the literature, Monroe (2006) found no compelling evidence that African-American boys are more disruptive than any of their peers. The majority of discipline referrals are written for problems with authority, which is subjective in nature (Skiba et al., 1997; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

In a discourse analysis of two high school science classrooms over five years, Vavrus and Cole (2002) found that suspensions occurred most often when there were multiple disruptive events in a classroom, but only one student was singled out and punished. In their seminal study, Skiba and colleagues (1997) found that at one school site, 10 teachers (17%) wrote 20 or more discipline referrals each, comprising 48.2% of the school's referrals for the year.

These two studies indicated that behavioral standards were not always consistently enforced in one classroom or school-wide. In their observations of classrooms, Vavrus and Cole (2002) found that several students in a classroom would be engaged in disruptive behavior, but the teacher would interpret only one particular utterance or act as hostile or disruptive and give

only that one student a discipline referral. In their analysis of records for 11,000 students in 19 middle schools, Skiba and colleagues (1997) found little evidence of a consistent relationship between the seriousness of an offense and the severity of the consequence. The authors found a substantial amount of variability in school discipline, some of which may have been due to individual teacher beliefs and attitudes. Their findings that almost half of the discipline referrals came from a small proportion of teachers suggest that further research is needed to identify specific classroom factors that are associated with office referrals and discipline.

School responses to disruptive behaviors are most likely to focus on punitive means rather than attempting to address the needs of the child that may be the root cause of the behavior (Fenning et al., 2012). Rocque (2010) posited that punitive discipline may exacerbate the problem and set in motion a spiral of events that can be detrimental to students. Researchers found that students with multiple suspensions were less likely to be proficient or higher in English language arts or mathematics than their peers with no suspensions or only a single suspension (Brown et al., 2012). The use of suspension is also associated with problems such as school dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2011). In their analysis of millions of school disciplinary and juvenile justice system records in Texas, Fabelo and colleagues (2011) found that 23% of students involved in school disciplinary system had later contact with juvenile justice system, while only 2% of students with no school disciplinary record had contact with the juvenile justice system.

This overreliance on exclusionary punishment (suspension and expulsion) has led to what many are calling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, which has been defined as a "collective system of local, state, and federal policies and procedures that siphons children out of school and into

prison" (Swain & Noblit, 2011, p. 466). Many researchers (Clark, 2004; Fenning & Rose, 2007) contend that the pressure from high stakes testing has resulted in zero tolerance policies being used to push students into the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Zero tolerance policies have "reduced the ability of schools and society to educate students about misbehavior and replaced it with criminalization of youth and, youth of color in particular" (Swain & Noblit, 2011, p. 471).

The statistics related to the disproportionate rate of African-American males suspended and expelled from school mirror that of the criminal justice system. Sixty-four percent of the 2.3 million people in jail or prison are minority (Edelman, 2009). At every stage of the system, from arrest to sentencing, minority representation grows larger and at a faster rate than Whites. African-American youth comprise 16% of all youth in the general population, but they constitute 30% of juvenile court referrals, 38% of youth in residential placement, and 58% of youth admitted to state adult prison (Piquero, 2008).

The reach of prison culture extends to schools as well. Along with the growing incarceration rates for youth of color, students must also endure surveillance cameras and security forces in schools (Giroux, 2009). Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has its own dedicated school police department, the Los Angeles School Police Department (LASPD). The LASPD has over 350 sworn police officers and an annual budget of over $52 million. LASPD officers are stationed at most high schools and many of the middle schools, especially in predominantly African-American and Latino communities (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).

When compared to other large school districts with school-based policing, LASPD had the highest rate of criminalization. During the 2011-2012 school year, there were a total of 8,993 students arrested and ticketed by the LASPD, which is more than any other school district has

reported (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).

Once students enter the juvenile justice system, their troubles are compounded. They often miss multiple days of school for court appearances, even if their cases are ultimately dismissed. Many students also face enormous difficulty reentering school after long suspensions, and schools rarely have adequate counseling programs for students who are returning from alternative placements (Wald & Losen, 2003).

According to the American Psychological Association (2008), inappropriate application of suspension policies may cause more harm than good, and they recommend that schools find a more constructive approach to discipline. The goal of any effective disciplinary system must be to ensure a safe school climate while avoiding policies and practices that may reduce students' opportunity to learn.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical narrative study was to understand how African-American boys in an urban middle school experience and understand the application of the California Education Code regarding discipline. This study sought to capture the voices of African-American middle school students who have been referred or suspended for defiance of authority in the classroom, and to understand how the students experience and articulate the impact of the disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives.

Freire (1970) reminded us, "Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?" (p. 27). Student voice can help schools to identify issues and to focus faculty on needed student supports (DeFur & Korinek, 2010). This study aimed to actively involve students in operationalizing the definition of "defiance" and in

finding alternatives to exclusionary discipline. The data gathered from the student interviews can impact school disciplinary practices and aid school administrators in adopting policies and practices that will reduce the number of office referrals and suspensions, and thus, increase instructional time for students. Cook-Sather (2006) found that listening to students can counter discriminatory tendencies in education.

Research Questions

Defiance is considered subjective in nature because defiant behavior is typically determined by teacher perceptions, and the perspectives of the student are often missing. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do African-American students perceive and describe their experiences with the teacher disciplinary referral process at a large, urban, public middle school?
2. How do African-American students perceive the impact of the school disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives?

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to bring student voice to the important and timely discussion regarding the use of suspension for acts of "defiance" in middle school. This is a critical matter for several reasons. First, research has shown that the primary reason for disciplinary referrals is defiance, and there is typically not a uniform response to defiant behavior at a school site or even in a classroom (Skiba et al., 2002). African-American students are three times more likely to be referred to the office and five times more likely to be suspended from school than their White peers (Shirley & Cornell, 2012).

Second, the use of suspension has been shown to be ineffective as a tool for the correction or the prevention of undesirable behavior in schools (Iselin, 2010), and students who have been suspended from school are more likely to drop out of school and enter the juvenile justice system (Fenning et al., 2012). Some teachers will say that one particular child needs to be removed from the class, so that the other children can learn. However, this notion that schools should "kick out the bad kids so that good kids can learn" violates a commitment to equal educational opportunity for all students (Losen, 2011), and it does not work (Noguera, 2008).

The information in this study provides school staff with an insight into and understanding of the meaning of the term “defiance” to the eleven African-American male middle school students who participated in this study. This study uncovered student and teacher behaviors that the participants believe are more likely to trigger student referrals for “defiance”. This information can be used to inform school-wide positive behavior plans and to inform decisions related to interventions for students and professional development for teachers, either for the entire staff or as individualized support for those teachers who over-refer.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two theories: critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy. Critical pedagogy illuminates the relationship between power, knowledge, and ideology (Giroux, 2011), and serves to challenge the roles that schools play in the political and cultural lives of students (Darder, 1991). The curriculum and practices in most schools continue to marginalize or exclude people of color and the economically disadvantaged, and those who do not excel academically are taught to blame themselves for their failure (Tyack, 1974).

The majority of Americans believe that we live in a meritocracy where the formal goal of education system is to be the "great equalizer" of our society. However, the function of the school system is to maintain the status quo—including the social inequalities—and schools actually serve to reproduce and perpetuate the inequalities and injustices that exist in the society at large (McLaren, 2007).

The "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality that is part of the social fabric of the United States helps to hide the fact that the same opportunities are not available to all, and the values and perspectives of the White middle class permeate cultural and institutional norms (Lynch & Baker, 2005). The school system relies on the "exceptions"—those who succeed despite the obstacles—to perpetuate the myth. Those who do not conform or choose not to conform, are labeled, demonized, punished, and pushed out of schools.

Paulo Freire is considered by many to be to the originator of critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he described traditional education as using the banking model. In the banking model, teachers dispense knowledge while students passively receive what is being dispensed. Freire declared, "Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits that the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 72). Freire argued that the banking model is used as a weapon to prepare the oppressed to adapt to their situation rather than challenge the situation that oppresses them.

Students have been taught to be silent, docile receptors of information. With the banking model of education, teachers talk and students listen. In this system, youth are being separated or alienated from the world, rather than connected to it, through education. Students, teachers,

and leaders lose sight of the transformative powers of education and begin to accept that this is "the way it is."

When students are disconnected and disengaged from the curriculum, they are more likely to resist, which can be perceived by the teacher as defiant and disrespectful behavior. Freire (1970) argued that the banking model needs to be replaced with problem-posing education where teachers must accept that students possess knowledge and solutions that they can share. Teachers must see themselves in a partnership with their students. hooks (1994) referred to this as engaged pedagogy and argued that engaging in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin to cross boundaries that may have been erected by race, gender, class, or professional standing. She argued that in order to honor and respect the reality and experiences of people of color, the style of teaching in the majority of U.S. schools must change.

Ladson-Billings (1995) has described culturally relevant pedagogy as critical "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18). The idea is based on the belief that if learning structures and activities are grounded in a cultural context that is familiar to the students, then student engagement and learning will be enhanced (Howard, 2001).

Despite its shortcomings and flaws, public education remains the "one best system" (Tyack, 1974). Because public schools must enroll all students, regardless of race, status, language, or need, they have the capability of playing a pivotal role in the efforts to further the goal of equity in our society.

Methodology

In order to capture the unique and complex experiences and perspectives of middle school students, the researcher conducted a critical narrative study. Qualitative research is based on a view that meaning is socially constructed and that multiple realities exist (Hatch, 2002). The use of critical narrative has been chosen because it aligns with the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy and is best suited to answer the research questions. Discovering how middle school students make sense of their experiences related to school discipline allowed for collecting and analyzing data that is richly descriptive and allows for depth of understanding on the topic (McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Merriam, 2002).

Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that "experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). Critical narrative was used to join together the stories of eleven African-American boys that illuminated their experiences and perspectives of the school discipline practices at their middle school.

Critical researchers are concerned with social inequities, the nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency (Carspecken, 1996), and this research adds to the body of literature that will hopefully refine policy and practice related to the use of exclusionary discipline in schools.

This study was conducted at Meadows Middle School (a pseudonym), where the researcher was the assistant principal at the time of data collection. During the period when research was conducted, 962 students were enrolled, including 8.5% students with disabilities, 44% English learners, and 92% socioeconomically disadvantaged. Sixty-nine percent of the

students were Hispanic and 23% were African American. Meadows Middle School (MMS) achieved an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 761 in 2013. During the 2012-2013 school year, there was a suspension rate of 22% with 215 suspensions. Although African-American students comprised only 23% of the student population, they accounted for approximately 50% of all suspensions.

This study employed purposeful sampling in order to ensure that the participants had substantial experience and information to share on the topic (Polkinghorne, 2005). The voices of African-American boys who have recently been involved in school discipline were identified in order for their voices to be heard. Referral data were used to invite students to participate in this study. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: 1) African-American males, 2) current eighth grade, general education students at Meadows Middle School; 3) attended Meadows Middle School for at least six months at the time the study began, and 5) received one or more office referrals during the 2013-2014 school year for defiance or disruption in the classroom. Students were selected based on submission of the parent permission slip and on their willingness to participate in the study.

The interviews with eight African-American male, middle school students constituted the crux of this critical narrative study. The interviews provided important insights into the students' experiences, interpretations, and perspectives of school discipline. Memories can be influenced by one's current mood and influenced by suggestions. Thus, the purpose of the interviews was not to produce factually accurate recalls of specific events but to allow for the students to reflect on the meaning of those events (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Students were interviewed individually two times, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed, and the researcher took notes during each interview.

Focus groups have been identified as useful to supplement other qualitative data such as interviews, with the group interaction producing new data and insights (Hatch, 2002). In order to supplement and triangulate the data collected through interviews, the researcher also conducted a focus group after the interview data were coded and analyzed. The focus group consisted of six participants, three students who had been previously interviewed individually and three additional participants who were new to the study. Hatch (2002) defined focus groups as "sets of individuals with similar characteristics or having shared experiences who sit down with a moderator to discuss a topic" (p. 24).

Discipline referrals and the researcher's field notes and journal were also analyzed. Data collected through interviews, focus group and document analysis were inductively analyzed to identify recurring patterns or common themes. Hatch (2002) defined inductive data analysis as "a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p. 161). As the data were collected, the researcher made note of the emerging themes. This process continued until all of the data together presented a story of the experiences of the participants in this study.

Limitations and Delimitations

Maxwell (1996) claimed that limitations in studies arise through the implementation of the project as well as in the descriptions, interpretations, and theories that arise from the study. The first limitation of this study was that of positionality. At the time of the study, the researcher

was the assistant principal of the middle school where the data were gathered, and thus there was a possibility for bias. Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic, the researcher selected participants who she felt would be comfortable talking to her. This decision was based on prior conversations with each student. Another possible limitation was that the students may not have reported honestly and may have given answers that they believed the researcher wanted to hear. The researcher had worked in the District for 15 years and had built relationships of care and trust with many of the students and families. She had known three of the participants since they were in elementary school. Data collection was kept separate from the school day with the exception of the focus group, which was conducted during lunch in order to accommodate the schedules of the six participants. Interviews were conducted in the conference room in the library after school, and questions were open-ended. The researcher never challenged a participant's perceptions of a disciplinary event with information from the teacher's referral.

A delimitation of this study was that students from only one school site were surveyed and interviewed, and therefore the results may not be generalizable to any other setting.

Definition of Terms

California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (*CALPADS):* The data system used by the California Department of Education (CDE) to maintain individual-level data including student demographics, discipline, and assessments for state and federal reporting purposes.

Culturally Responsive Classroom Management (CRCM): Classroom management practices are based on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2000) and predicated on the idea that the closer that care in the classroom resembles the manner in which it is displayed at home,

the more responsive students will be (Howard, 2002). Key components of CRCM include: establishing clear expectations for behavior and a caring classroom environment, working with students' families, and using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003).

Defiance: Student behavior that can range from non-compliant to boldly confrontational that is typically defined solely by the adult involved in the situation.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): A school-wide, systems-based method for improving student behavior. Clear expectations are introduced at the beginning of the year and reinforced throughout the year with rewards and a progression of consequences (Cregor, 2008).

Suspension: Removal from the school for one to ten days for disciplinary reasons.

Organization of the Dissertation

The purpose of this study was to understand the term "defiance" at an urban middle school from the perspective of the students, and to understand how the students perceived and articulated the impact of the disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives. Chapter One provides the background, purpose, and significance of this study in addition to outlining the theoretical framework and research methods that were used. Chapter Two reviews and analyzes the literature on school discipline, defiance, disproportionality, classroom practices, and student voice. Chapter Three explains the research methods and describes in detail how the study was conducted. Chapter Four presents the data and findings. Finally, Chapter Five addresses possible implications of this study and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Exclusionary school discipline, which includes removing students from the classroom through the use office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, contributes to reduced learning opportunities for students of all races, but African-American males are excluded from class for disciplinary reasons more frequently than any of their peer groups (Shirley & Cornell, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 1997). This disproportionality of African-American students, particularly males, in exclusionary discipline has been termed the "discipline gap" (Monroe, 2005; Skiba, 2000).

Exclusionary discipline practices can have detrimental effects on students beyond the number of hours or days of missed instruction resulting from each disciplinary moment. Researchers have found that students with multiple suspensions were less likely to be proficient or higher in English language arts or mathematics than their peers with no suspensions or with a single suspension (Brown et al., 2012). The use of suspension is also associated with problems such as school dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2011). The term "School-to-Prison Pipeline" has emerged to describe this trend of funneling students out of the public school system and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Bahena, Cooc, Currie-Rubin, Kuttner, & Ng, 2012). The purpose of the present study was to understand how African-American male students at one public, urban middle school experienced and understood the effects of the application of the California Education Code regarding school discipline.

School discipline does not occur in isolation, and African-American students have also been overrepresented in the number of referrals for special education services (U.S. Department of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection [CRDC], 2006), have lower rates of academic achievement (CRDC, 2012), and lower high school graduation rates (CDE DataQuest, 2013). This chapter puts the issue of the discipline gap in context by first examining the aforementioned inequities before analyzing the literature on school discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline. In addition, critical pedagogy theory is discussed to assist in developing a possible explanation for African-American overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion for defiance.

Theoretical Framework

The K-12 educational system in the United States is not the great equalizer that many believe it is. On the contrary, the public school system in the U.S. serves to reinforce the inequity and injustices that exist in the larger society.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy was the theoretical framework that guided this study in terms of examining how schools replicate social injustices that exist in larger society. Critical pedagogy questions "how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not" (McLaren, 2009, p. 63).

Schools continue to be viewed as politically-neutral institutions that serve to educate all children with the knowledge and skills needed to function in society (Darder, 2012). However, our educational system is predicated on White, middle-class values, customs, and norms, and

children who are neither White nor middle class are at a disadvantage (Delpit, 1995; McKnight & Chandler, 2012).

Critical pedagogy is a school of thought that illuminates the relationship between power, knowledge, and ideology (Giroux, 2011), and is aimed at empowering the powerless and transforming existing injustices and social inequalities (Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 2007). Giroux (2009) defined empowerment as the process where "students acquire the means to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the take-for-granted assumptions about the way we live" (p. 448).

Contrary to popular belief, the function of the school system is to maintain the status quo, including the social inequalities and injustices that exist in the society at large, which are actually reproduced and perpetuated by the school system (McLaren, 2007). Delpit (1995) argued that "to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same" (p. 39). From a very young age, children are told that if they work hard enough, they can become anything they want, a doctor, astronaut, or even the President of the United States. However, historically in the United States, there have always been students who did not fit within the established school structures because of their race or class. The curriculum and practices in most schools marginalize or exclude people of color and the economically disadvantaged, and those who do not excel academically are taught to blame themselves for their failure (Tyack, 1974).

Before we can begin to change and reform our school system, we must acknowledge the unseen dimension of White privilege and the myth of meritocracy, both of which are used to maintain the status quo. The "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality helps to hide the

fact that the values and perspectives of the dominant group permeate cultural and institutional norms. The school system relies on the "exceptions"—those who succeed despite the obstacles—to perpetuate the myth. Those who do not conform or choose not to conform, are labeled, demonized, punished, and pushed out of schools (Lynch & Baker, 2005).

The public school system in the United States perpetuates the myth of meritocracy in two key ways. First, definitions of success and merit in schools are based on the values of the dominant class. Second, students from non-dominant cultures learn to blame themselves for their underachievement (McLaren, 2009). The system implies that they do not have the necessary intelligence and/or motivation to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered to them by the free public educational system (Darder, 2012).

Anger is a legitimate response to institutions that set up individuals for failure, but students are very often punished for displaying anger in school:

> Failure to keep that anger in check, to act and learn appropriately, in particular for those in any way marginalized, might mean school expulsion, criminalization, or pathologization. If you do not have the right to be hostile, anger can be read as violence, disruption, disrespect, or as evidence of inherent deviancy, or cognitive and behavioral impairment. (Meiners, 2007, p. 30)

Freire (1970) described traditional education as being predicated on the banking model. In the banking model, teachers dispense knowledge while students are passive. He indicated, "Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits that the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 72). Freire also argued that the banking

model is used as a weapon to prepare the oppressed to adapt to their situation rather than equipping them to challenge the situation that oppresses them.

School is a primary location of both oppression and potential liberation of youth (Smyth, 2006). Schools are places where students' identity negotiation takes place and where relational power is created and tested (Smyth, 2006). Context makes a difference in the amount of freedom students are allowed (Kozol, 2005). For example, many urban schools resort to maintaining order with the use of security officers, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and exclusionary punishment, instead of one based on creating relationships and helping students become active agents who are capable of success (Kozol, 2005; Smyth, 2006). The tightening of reins, with an increasing number of rules and surveillance, reduces trust and community and creates a culture in which students can either choose to comply or resist (Kozol, 2005; Smyth, 2006). Student resistance often takes the form of disengagement, truancy, committing violent acts, acting out, or dropping out (Smyth, 2006). On the other hand, schools could channel this resentment into liberatory efforts that foster critical thinking, activism, social justice, and change (Freire, 1970).

Despite its shortcomings and flaws, public education remains the "one best system" (Tyack, 1974). Because public schools must enroll all students, regardless of race, status, language, or need, they are capable of playing a pivotal role in the efforts to further the goal of equity in our society. In order for young people to be empowered, we must place responsibility for solving school problems directly in their hands (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy was the theoretical framework that guided this study in terms of examining the influence and impact that individual teachers have on their students

through their teaching methods and the classroom management techniques they employ.

The teacher is the main actor in the majority of classrooms, and the curriculum often becomes detached from the lived reality of the students (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1970). When students do not see themselves represented in the curriculum, they are more likely to feel angry and show signs of resistance. Many teachers perceive this behavior as being defiant and disrespectful. Darder (2012) argued that it is important to understand the degree to which a student's oppositional act expresses his or her need to "struggle against elements of dehumanization" (p. 92).

Educators must move away from deficit model thinking and accept that all students already possess knowledge and solutions that they can share. Teachers also need to see themselves in a partnership with their students (Freire, 1970). According to hooks (1994), engaging in dialogue with students is one of the simplest ways educators can break down walls that may have been erected by race, gender, class, or professional standing. She argued that the style of teaching in the majority of U.S. schools must change in order to honor and respect the reality and experiences of people of color.

Delpit (2012) has found that many children of color do not want to disappoint a teacher who they feel believes in them, and the author believes that a teacher must know his or her students before they can teach them. Teachers must develop relationships with their students and understand their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy. In order to do that, teachers "must learn *who* the children are and not focus on *what* we assume them to be—at-risk, learning disabled, unmotivated, defiant, disordered, etc." (p. 38).

History of Inequality

The problem of African-American students being suspended from school at higher rates than their peers is not new, nor is it the only injustice African Americans have faced in the public school system. The achievement gap and the discipline gap are the current issues of debate, but they are part of a long history of inequity in education.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that the education community's current focus on the achievement gap fails to address the underlying problem and will only garner short-term solutions. She argued, "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" (p. 5).

Education for African Americans was forbidden during the time of slavery. Ignorance was the major control instrument of slavery (Erickson, 1997), and the educational policy of "compulsory ignorance" existed from the time of slavery to emancipation. During this time, it was both illegal and dangerous for a slave to learn how to read and write (Irons, 2002), and only a relatively small number of African Americans were educated either in religious schools or by their masters (Jones-Wilson, 1990).

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896 established that schools would provide a "separate but equal" education for African-American students (Jones-Wilson, 1990). However, schools were anything but equal, and this sense of inferiority, which was sanctioned by law, affected the motivation of children to learn (Irons, 2002). African-American students received cast-off textbooks and materials from White schools. In 1940, White schools in rural states spent an average of $1,166 per classroom compared to $477 per classroom in African-American schools (Tyack, 1974).

Although segregation of schools ended in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision, the inequalities between White schools and African-American schools did not disappear, and race-related problems persisted in public schools (Thompson, 2004). Desegregation also led to the loss of teaching positions for African Americans (Tyack, 1974), and inequalities became entrenched in our society through habit, custom, and formation of attitudes (Jones-Wilson, 1990). Furthermore, African-American students in the South did not have universal secondary schooling until 1968 (Anderson, 1988). Randall Robinson (2000) explained the education debt this way:

> No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch. (p.74)

Although racial discrimination is now illegal, inequities continue to be reproduced through institutional practices and cultural representations of racial difference (Ferguson, 2001; Lewis, 2003). hooks (2003) maintained that everyone in the United States, Black or White, is "born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy," but, "we can choose to resist this socialization" (p. 56).

However, norms and procedures, which are based primarily on White, middle-class values, used to maintain order in schools remain and are unquestioned in the majority of schools and classrooms. In her fieldwork at a large, urban intermediate school (grades four through six), Ferguson (2001) found that cultural images that stigmatize African-American males in the United States as criminals or as an endangered species imply that African-American males are

therefore responsible for their fate. These images also influenced school staff in their identification and classification of students and in their decision-making regarding punishment. One administrator at the school referred to some African-American students as "unsalvageable" and "on whom precious resources would be wasted" (p. 4).

Racial Disparity in Educational Outcomes

In 2009, the average National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reading score of African-American students was 26 points lower than their White peers in both the fourth and eighth grades. The results in mathematics were similar. African-American fourth grade students scored 26 points lower and African-American eighth grade students scored 32 points lower than White students. Neither gap was measurably different from the corresponding gaps in 2007 and 1990 (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010).

The Office for Civil Rights analyzed data from approximately 85% of the nation's students during the 2009-2010 school year. They found that nearly three-fourths of the students enrolled in Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs were White and Asian students. White students made up 49% of the total population and 62% of the GATE population as compared to African-American students who were 25% of the total population and only 16% of the GATE population. Furthermore, African-American students represented 16% of sixth through eighth grade students, but 42% of students in those grades had been retained one year (CRDC, 2012).

In research conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010), African-American students were found to be more than seven times less likely to take an Advanced Placement (AP) exam than White students, and the average SAT

score of African-American males was lower than that of White males in critical reading, mathematics, and writing. The gap between White and African-American students taking the SAT was 104 points in critical reading, 120 points in mathematics, and 99 points in writing.

In her qualitative study at Rosa Parks School (pseudonym) in a medium-sized city on the West Coast, Ferguson (2001) described common school practices, cultural differences, and underlying messages that actually set up African-American boys for school failure. For example, African-American children occupied the remedial classrooms, while White students largely occupied the enriched, innovative programs. Students who scored lower than the 37th percentile on the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) were placed in compensatory education classes for two hours per week. Seventy-five percent of the students in that class were African-American, although they represented only 50% of the total school population.

African-American students are also disproportionally represented in special education programs. According to the CRDC (2006), African-American students represented 17.13% of public school students, yet 32.01% were identified as having an intellectual disability (formerly termed mental retardation), 28.91% as being emotionally disturbed, 21.66% as being developmentally delayed, and 20.23% as having a specific learning disability (SLD). In her review of the literature, Ford (2012) found that the majority of special education referrals often begin with suspensions and expulsions. This is especially the case with African-American and Hispanic males.

African-American students have consistently represented about 10% of the high school graduates who took the SAT, as compared to White students who represent 67% of SAT takers.

White students have the highest average critical reading score (528) while African Americans have the lowest (430) (Aud et al., 2010).

While high school graduation rates have been increasing across the nation, the gap between White students and African-American students still exists. In 2008, African-American males were nearly twice as likely to drop out of high school as White males (Lewis et al., 2010). In California, the 2011 graduation rate for African Americans was 63% compared to 85% for White students (Belfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Horning Fox, 2013). Minnesota had the largest gap with 84% of White students graduating compared to 49% of African-American students. Other states with higher graduation rates also had some of the largest gaps. For example, Wisconsin graduated 91% of White students and only 64% of African Americans, and 90% of White students in New Jersey graduated, while only 69% of African Americans did (Belfanz et al., 2013).

African-American students are overrepresented in virtually every negative category related to education from referrals and placement in special education programs to high school dropout rates. They are also underrepresented in all positive aspects, including placement in GATE and AP classes, achievement on standardized tests, and high school graduation rates.

Discipline Gap

Disciplinary practices mirror the disparity between the races that exists in academics. African-American students are four times more likely than their White peers to receive an office referral (Skiba et al., 2011) and three times more likely to be suspended and expelled from school (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). On average, 4.6% of all White students are suspended, compared to 16.4% of all African-American students. African-American males have the highest

suspension rate (20%) of any of their peers (U.S. Department of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection [CRDC], 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) included preschool data on suspensions and expulsions for the first time in its collection for 2011-2012 and found that racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions start early. The OCR collected data on one million students from 99% of the schools that offer preschool and revealed that nearly 5,000 students were suspended once, and over 2,500 students were suspended from preschool more than one time. African-American students represent only 18% of preschool enrollment, but 42% of the preschool children who were suspended once, and 48% of the preschool children who were suspended more than one time (CRDC, 2014).

The California Education Code §48925 defined suspension as the "removal of a pupil from ongoing instruction for adjustment purposes." The length of suspension varies from state to state, but typically ranges from one to ten days, and anything over ten days is considered an expulsion. Alternatives to suspension can include: student conference with the teacher, the counselor, and administrators; peer mediation; restitution; letter of apology; lunch detention; community service; and parent conference (HSD Handbook, 2014).

Most often, it is the classroom teachers who make the first referral in the disciplinary process, and therefore, they have a significant influence on who receives discipline and why (Noguera, 2008). Researchers analyzed the disciplinary records of 11,000 students in 19 middle schools in a Midwestern, urban public school district. They found that White students were more likely to be referred to the office for offenses such as smoking, leaving the class without permission, vandalism, and obscene language. African-American students were more likely to

be referred for more subjective offenses such as disrespect, excessive noise, threatening behavior, and loitering (Skiba et al., 2002).

Defiance

The majority of discipline referrals and suspensions are for defiance of authority, which is a subjective term (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002). Behaviors that are considered defiant at a school site can vary from classroom to classroom, therefore the consequences may not always be applied uniformly or fairly (Iselin, 2010).

In their analysis of disciplinary referrals at an urban high school, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that 67% of all referrals were written for "defiance of adult authority." African-American students comprised 30% of the school enrollment but were 58% of those referred for defiance. White students, on the other hand, were 37% of school enrollment, but comprised only 5% of those referred for defiance. The proportion of referrals issued for defiance compared to other reasons was also higher for African-American students. Almost 70% of the referrals written for African-Americans were issued for defiance compared to 55% of referrals for White students.

Researchers and practitioners continue to explore whether the behavior of African-American students is such that it warrants more suspensions than their peers. Studies have shown this not to be the case. In an extensive review of the literature, Monroe (2006) found no compelling evidence that African-American boys are more disruptive than any of their peers. In an analysis of the disciplinary records of 11,000 students in 19 middle schools, researchers found that males and African-American students were overrepresented in all measures of school discipline, which included referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2002).

Behavioral standards are not always consistently enforced, neither in one classroom nor school-wide. In their observations of two high school science classrooms over the course of five years, Vavrus and Cole (2002) found that teachers did not deal with all disruptive behavior in the same manner. Several students in a classroom would be engaged in disruptive behavior, but the teacher would ignore some students while singling out one student with a discipline referral. Often that one student was African American and male. The researchers also found the sociocultural relations in the classroom would shape whether or not a disciplinary moment resulted in an office referral.

In their seminal study in which they analyzed the records for 11,000 students in 19 middle schools, Skiba and colleagues (1997) found that 10 teachers (17%) at one school site wrote 20 or more discipline referrals comprising 48.2% of the school's referrals for the year. The researchers also found little evidence of a consistent relationship between the seriousness of an offense and the severity of the consequence, and this inconsistency may have been due to teacher attitudes. Their findings that almost half of the discipline referrals came from a small proportion of teachers suggest that further research is needed to identify specific classroom factors that are associated with office referrals and discipline.

School responses to disruptive behaviors do not usually address the needs of the child and instead are most likely to focus on punitive means (Fenning et al., 2012). According to Rocque (2010), punitive discipline practices may make the problem worse and set in motion a spiral of events that can be harmful to students. Students with multiple office referrals are more likely to be suspended, and students with multiple suspensions were less likely to be proficient or higher in English language arts or mathematics than their peers with no suspensions or a single

suspension (Brown et al., 2012). Furthermore, the use of suspension is also associated with problems such as school dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system (Iselin, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011).

Federal Policies

Disciplinary practices and policies in public schools may be intended to be racially-neutral, but they can have a discriminatory effect, as seen in the disproportionate rates of suspension for African-American students. Under the disparate impact theory, a policy that has discriminatory effects would be in violation of the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI (Losen, 2012). A policy or practice, such as suspension, may be justifiable, but if it has a more adverse impact on a protected minority group, then it violates the law under the disparate impact theory. Even if the policy was deemed educationally necessary, it could still be in violation of the law if there was an equally effective alternative available that had a less adverse impact. The data show that the discipline policies in public schools across the nation have discriminatory effects on African-American students (Butler, Lewis, Moore, & Scott, 2012; Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002).

Politicians, researchers, and practitioners are concerned with the over-use of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions as a response to defiant behavior in school. In January 2014, the United States Department Education and the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, jointly issued a 23-page Dear Colleague Letter. The letter provided guidelines for school districts on how to avoid racial disparities in the administration of student discipline.

Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibit public school districts from discriminating in the administration of student discipline based on personal characteristics, such

as race, color, and national origin. In his announcement of these guidelines in January 2014, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that the redesign of school discipline practices was long overdue, and that students should be removed from the classroom only as a last resort and only for serious infractions that endanger the safety of themselves or others (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

In March 2014, Duncan denounced the inequities associated with discipline practices as "socially divisive, educationally unsound, morally bankrupt and economically self-destructive" (Clozel, 2014). This comment was in response to the release of the U. S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights report, which found that African-American students continue to be suspended and expelled at a rate that is three times greater than that of White students. The report also included data from preschools for the first time and found that although African Americans comprise less than one fifth of preschool enrollment, they make up almost half of the students who have been suspended from preschool multiple times.

State Polices

California K -12 public schools are responsible for complying with the California Education Code (EC), and Section 48900 outlines the allowable grounds for student suspension and expulsion. Defiance in the classroom is the most common reason for suspension. Forty-two percent of the more than 700,000 suspensions in California during the 2010-2011 school year were for "willful defiance" (Children Now, 2013). Subsection (k) originally allowed students in grades kindergarten through 12 to be suspended or expelled if they have "disrupted school activities or otherwise willfully defied the valid authority" of school personnel (Children Now, 2013).

California Assembly Member Roger Dickenson introduced Assembly Bill 420 (AB 420) in February 2013, and Governor Brown signed the bill into law (Willon, 2014), which became effective January 1, 2015. The provisions outlined in AB 420 eliminate the use of suspension for disruption and defiance in kindergarten through grade three and amend EC §48900 (k) to allow for suspension of students who have "substantially disrupted school activities" or have "substantially prevented instruction from occurring" in grades four through 12 only. Suspension would be allowable only on the third offense of the school year. In addition, prior to making a recommendation to suspend, schools must have notified parents or guardians of the problematic behavior and of the alternative means of correction that have been attempted. School districts will no longer have the authority to recommend expulsion based upon disruption and defiance for any student regardless of the grade level (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014).

While this study focused on the overuse of defiance, as defined by California Education Code, as a reason to suspend, it is worthwhile to examine how other states define suspendable infractions. Skiba, Eaton, and Sotoo (2004) searched individual state's websites for links to statutes, codes, or constitutions. Five themes related to expulsion or suspension emerged: definition/length, types and definitions of infractions, alternatives to suspension or expulsion, due process, and zero tolerance and corporal punishment. Infractions defined by state statute that can lead to expulsion or suspension range from firearms, seen most often in state statutes, to vulgar or obscene acts, seen the least. Table 1 shows the number of states that allow for expulsion or suspension for infractions that are most similar to California's §48900 (k) statute.

Table 1
Infractions Defined by State Statute as Leading to Expulsion or Out of School Suspensions

Category	Definition	No. of States Defining as Expulsion	No. of States Defining as Out of School Suspension
Disruption/Misconduct	Disruption of educational process, misconduct, disruption, disorderly conduct, misdemeanor, indolence	19	15
Gross/Chronic Misconduct	Gross, substantial, habitual, persistent misconduct, disruption, disorderly conduct, misdemeanor, indolence	16	13
Insubordination	Insubordination, disobedience, defiance of authority	12	12
Gross Insubordination	Gross, substantial, habitual, persistent, continued defiance, disobedience, insubordination, incorrigible	9	10

Note. Adapted from *Factors associated with state rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion. Children left behind policy briefs. Supplementary analysis 2-B*, by R.J. Skiba, J. Eaton, & N. Sotoo, 2004, Indiana: Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy. Used with permission.

Local Policies

Several school boards in the State of California have made decisions to go beyond AB 420 and have banned the use of "willful defiance" as a cause for suspension and expulsion. LAUSD was the first school district in California to ban the use of suspension for "willful defiance" by adopting the "Board Resolution-2013 School Discipline Policy and School Climate Bill of Rights" on May 14, 2013. This new policy eliminates the subjective use of suspension for actions such as not coming to class prepared or refusing to remove a hat in the classroom (Los Angeles Unified School District [LAUSD], 2013).

The LAUSD Board of Education issued Policy Bulletin 6231.0, "Discipline Foundation Policy: School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS)," in February 2014 (LAUSD, 2014). This bulletin provides school staff with guidelines and resources related to discipline and utilizing alternatives to school suspension to correct student misconduct. This discipline policy is based on prevention and intervention, and lists the responsibilities of central office staff, school administrators, teachers, and other school staff, parents, guardians, community members, and students.

School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) programs focus on establishing a set of school-wide behavioral expectations for students, teaching those expectations, and acknowledging and rewarding appropriate behavior. Cregor (2008) found that in two schools in Oregon where SWPBIS was implemented, the rate of office referrals was reduced by 50% per year.

LAUSD has also established a School Climate Bill of Rights, which is based on six guiding principles: respect, responsibility, appreciation of differences, honesty, safety, and life-long learning. Each school has implemented a SWPBIS plan, and beginning in the 2015-2016 school year, all schools will have developed and begun using restorative justice approaches to resolve student interpersonal conflicts. Restorative justice emphasizes using a cooperative process to repair any harm caused by criminal or disruptive behavior, instead of relying on punishment (LAUSD, 2013).

In August 2014, LAUSD announced that it was expanding efforts to keep students in the classroom by decriminalizing minor offenses committed on campus. The Los Angeles School Police are no longer issuing tickets for minor violations, such as most campus fights, petty thefts,

vandalism, trespassing or possession of tobacco or a small quantity of marijuana. Instead, students will be referred to the school administrators or YouthSource centers for counseling and support (Watanabe, 2014).

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The over-use of exclusionary punishment in schools has led to what many are calling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, which has been defined as a "collective system of local, state, and federal policies and procedures that siphons children out of school and into prison" (Swain & Noblit, 2011, p. 466). Laura (2014) argued that those who get caught up in the School-to-Prison Pipeline do so because they have been poorly educated and prepared only for dead-end jobs, the streets, or permanent detention. The image of poor children of color being derailed from the academic and vocational paths and directed toward jails and prisons is vivid.

Noguera (2003) found that suspensions only work for those students who care about school. Too often, schools address only the problematic behavior by dispensing punishment, but fail to examine the underlying reasons for the behavior. Thus, the schools are unable to address the students' needs that may contribute to the problematic behavior. The punitive disciplinary practices make students feel uncared for at school and angry at the adults involved, and suspended students may become even less invested in school rules and course work and become less motivated to achieve academic success (Advancement Project, 2010; Gregory et al., 2010). The common factor linking school and the School-to-Prison Pipeline continues to be exclusionary discipline in the schools (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, & Leone, 2012).

Zero tolerance policies have "reduced the ability of schools and society to educate students about misbehavior and replaced it with criminalization of youth and, youth of color in

particular" (Swain & Noblit, 2011, p. 471). Many researchers (Clark, 2004; Fenning & Rose, 2007) argue that the pressure from high stakes testing has resulted in zero tolerance policies being used to push students out of the classroom and into the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Edelman (2009) asserted that "incarceration is becoming the new American apartheid, and poor children of color are the fodder" (p. 67). Sixty-four percent of the 2.3 million people in jail or prison are minorities (Edelman, 2009), and the statistics related to the rate of African-American males suspended and expelled from school mirror that of the criminal justice system. From arrest to sentencing, minority representation grows larger and at a faster rate than Whites. African-American youth comprise 16% of all youth in the general population, but they constitute 30% of juvenile court referrals, 38% of youth in residential placement, and 58% of youth admitted to state adult prison (Piquero, 2008).

Along with the growing incarceration rates for youth of color, students must also face surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and security forces in schools (Giroux, 2009). According to Meiners (2007), school architecture, curriculum, socialization process, and the presence of police on campuses all result in youth of color being prepared for institutionalization through their schools. She argued that schools have become “feeder institutions” for jails and prisons. Giroux (2009) agreed:

> School has become a model for a punishing society in which children who commit a rule violation as minor as a dress code infraction or slightly acting out in class can be handcuffed, booked, and put in a jail cell. (p. 19)

The Los Angeles School Police Department (LASPD) has recently reduced the overall number of tickets issued and arrests made on LAUSD campuses, but the gap between White

students and students of color has grown wider. In 2012-2013, 93.9% of all tickets issued went to African-American and Latino students. Compared to White students in LAUSD, African Americans were four and a half times more likely to be ticketed or arrested while at school. African-American students were five and a half times more likely than White students to receive a ticket for vandalism, which can be given for possession of markers or writing on desks or walls. African-American students were also 29 times more likely than White students to be ticketed for "disturbing the peace." Disturbing the peace tickets can be issued when a student has a verbal altercation with a peer or with school staff. The citation is similar to a referral for disruption or defiance but with graver consequences, and it is one of the most frequent tickets issued by school police (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).

Arrests and citations at the school site obviously lead a student directly to the juvenile justice system. The use of suspension as a disciplinary measure is associated with entry into the juvenile justice system as well (Skiba et al., 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003). The single largest predictor of later arrest among adolescent females is having been suspended, expelled, or retained while in middle school (Wald & Losen, 2003).

In their analysis of millions of school and juvenile justice records in Texas, Fabelo and colleagues (2011) found that 23% of students involved in school disciplinary systems had later contact with the juvenile justice system compared to 2% of those with no school disciplinary records. Furthermore, nearly half of those students who were disciplined 11 or more times were later in contact with the juvenile justice system. In a longitudinal study of 6,000 adolescents in Victoria, Australia, and Washington State in the U.S., Hemphill and Hargreaves (2009) found

that students who were suspended from school were 50% more likely to engage in antisocial behavior and 70% more likely to engage in violent behavior 12 months later.

Students' troubles are amplified once they enter the juvenile justice system. Educational and juvenile justice systems lack a coordinated effort, and students often miss multiple days of school for court appearances, even if their cases are dismissed. Many students also face enormous difficulty reentering school after long suspensions, and schools rarely have systems in place for students to catch up on missed work or adequate counseling programs for students who are returning from alternative placements (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Policies Impacting School Discipline Practices

Zero Tolerance

The rise in exclusionary discipline practices and the involvement of police officers on school campuses can be traced to the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (DFSCA) in 1986 and the Safe and Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994, which provided the legal framework for swift and severe responses to student behavior involving possession of weapons or drugs on campus (Mediratta, 2012). GFSA requires a one-year mandatory sentence for only one offense of bringing or possessing a firearm on a school campus, but it does not mandate states or schools to implement any other mandatory zero tolerance policies (Mediratta, 2012). However, many school districts have expanded upon the GFSA policy and began using exclusionary discipline for other offenses such as bullying, fighting, drug and alcohol possession or use, and wearing banned articles of clothing (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011). This became known as "zero tolerance," which can be defined as a "highly structured disciplinary policy that

permits little flexibility in outcome by imposing severe sanctions for even minor violations of a school rule" (Gregory & Cornell, 2009, p. 107).

By 1997, at least 79% of schools nationwide had adopted zero tolerance policies. These policies evolved from a belief that failure to strongly punish misbehavior sends a message that the school is not serious about the safety of their students and staff. Policies can vary from school to school, and only 26 states require alternative educational assignments for suspended or expelled students (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011).

With the passage of the DFSCA and GFSA along with the high-profile school shootings of the mid-1990s, many schools began to assume that they were now dealing with a new breed of violent, amoral, apathetic students (Giroux, 2009). By the early 2000s, local zero tolerance policies were going beyond federal law, and students were being suspended for many less threatening offenses such as wearing hats or bringing plastic weapons, aspirin, or nail files to school (Mediratta, 2012).

When the less threatening offenses were added to local policies, the enforcement of such policies became more subjective. These highly subjective practices impact African-American students more than any other group (Meiners, 2007). For example, two African-American students were suspended for break dancing at a high school in Chicago because a White administrator thought some of their dance poses were gang signs. Similarly, in Florida, a White substitute teacher was trying to maintain discipline in the classroom when a female African-American student said, "I'm going to whip you." The girl was expelled and charged with first-degree misdemeanor assault (Losen et al., 2012).

In addition to rising rates of suspension and expulsion, student referrals to local law enforcement agencies increased as well. In the Denver Public Schools, there was a 71% increase in the number of student referrals to law enforcement between 2000 and 2004. Many of those referrals were for nonviolent behaviors. The Chicago public school system had over 8,000 students arrested in 2003, often for minor offenses such as pushing, tardiness, and using spitballs (Giroux, 2009).

Zero tolerance policies do not make students feel any safer while on campus. Schools with higher rates of suspension and expulsion have less satisfactory ratings of school climate, spend more time on disciplinary matters, and have lower rates of school-wide academic achievement (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rausch & Skiba, 2006). Individual students suffer as well. Students who are suspended or expelled are not in a classroom learning and are more likely to develop or cement negative attitudes toward learning and school. When students are singled out for more subjective disciplinary measures, their developing sense of justice and self-worth is harmed (Meiners, 2007).

No Child Left Behind

The pressure to raise standardized test scores has also contributed to the increased use of exclusionary disciplinary practices. When schools were faced with meeting the performance targets of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (*NCLB*), which Congress reauthorized in 2001, or losing funding, many cut back on non-tested subjects such as social studies, art, and physical education and focused on test preparation activities. The results, according to students, are that classes are less interesting, students who are able to sit quietly are rewarded, and students who cannot do so are punished (Losen, 2011). In a study analyzing over 40,000 disciplinary incidents in Florida,

Figlio (2006) found that suspensions and expulsions increased in the months preceding the state's standardized testing, and lower-performing students consistently received harsher punishment than their higher-achieving peers.

Cultural Mismatch

> When we educators look out at a classroom of black faces, we must understand that we are looking at children at least as brilliant as those from any well-to-do white community. If we do not recognize the brilliance before us, we cannot help but carry out the stereotypic societal view that these children are somehow damaged goods and that they cannot be expected to succeed. (Delpit, 2012, p. 5)

Cultural mismatch theory suggests that when critical components of teaching and learning are not culturally congruent, there can be negative outcomes for students (Howard, 2001). Delpit (2012) argued that if the curriculum does not connect in positive ways to the students' culture, then it is doomed to failure, and "successful instruction is constant, rigorous, integrated across disciplines, connected to students' lived cultures, connected to their intellectual legacies, engaging, and designed for critical thinking and problem solving that is useful beyond the classroom" (p. 37).

McKnight and Chandler (2012) used critical race theory and Pierre Bourdieu's framework to illustrate how issues of race and class are not questioned within the educational system. The authors argued that race and class discrimination have been imbedded within the institutional curriculum in the United States from the beginning, but we pretend that our curriculum is objective and neutral when in fact it was designed to maintain the status quo:

> The superficial neutrality of schools and their structures of power give the appearance that the institution is the same for all races, thus producing the assumption that the same results can be expected from all, and if this does not occur, then it is the individual student's or teacher's fault. (McKnight & Chandler, 2012, p. 80)

According to Bourdieu, social constructs such as race, capital, and environment serve to define what is considered natural and common sense. The curriculum in most schools tends to marginalize or exclude people of color, and those who do not excel academically are taught to blame themselves.

There is a strong relationship between the hidden curriculum of race and class and the formal, academic curriculum (Ferguson, 2001). The "hidden" curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school. While the "formal" curriculum consists of the courses, lessons, and learning activities students participate in, as well as the knowledge and skills educators intentionally teach to students, the hidden curriculum consists of the unspoken academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school (Thompson, 2004).

The hidden curriculum is described as "hidden" because it is usually unacknowledged or unexamined by teachers and students. Also, the values and lessons reinforced by the hidden curriculum are often the accepted status quo, and it may be assumed that these "hidden" practices and messages do not need to change, even if they are contributing to undesirable behaviors and results such as conflicts or high suspension rates (Ferguson, 2001).

The hidden curriculum consists in the formal and academic curriculum, and once a student is labeled "at-risk," he or she becomes both more visible in the classroom and more

likely to be punished for rule breaking (Ferguson, 2001). Stereotypes, whether conscious or unconscious, can influence teachers' expectations of students and the students' expectations of themselves, and grouping practices that take place in some schools often reinforce the stereotypes. Those stereotypes and assumptions that are made that label African-American boys as too loud, too aggressive, too violent, or too dumb only serve to foster the behaviors and attitudes that educators find objectionable and problematic (Noguera, 2008).

In her three-year study in a low-income African-American urban community and its elementary school, Gilmore (1985) found that "attitude" was the major literacy achievement identified and articulated repeatedly by teachers, parents, administrators and children. A "good attitude" was a significant factor in students' academic success, and "attitude" outweighed academic achievement or standardized test scores in selecting students for honors classes or special academic preference. One teacher said, "Have you seen our sixth-grade Academic Plus students? They're cultured. They're not street kids. Have you seen the way they carry themselves?" (p. 112).

Gilmore's study focused on two key behaviors that school staff believed demonstrated inappropriate or bad attitudes: stylized sulking and step dancing. Staff viewed both behaviors as exclusively African-American, and the researcher viewed them as "portraits of resistance" and "face-saving dances" (Gilmore, 1985, p. 113). Stylized sulking involves nonverbal gestures such as lifting one's chin and pushing out the lower lip, scowling, and putting one's hands on their hips. This sulking is seen as resistance to the school culture.

Step dancing has long been a part of African-American culture. These dances consist of chanted rhymes punctuated with foot stepping and hand clapping and girls routinely performed

them during recess. The staff, however, labeled the step dancing as "lewd," "fresh," and "inappropriate for school." With no discussion or warning, the principal banned step dancing one morning with an announcement over the public address system and stated, "Nice girls don't do that" (Gilmore, 1985, p. 119).

In his ethnographic study in which he examined the social dynamics behind the statistics provided by disciplinary referrals, Arriaza (2003) found that once the relationship between the student and teacher becomes confrontational, it will most likely erode. According to his student focus group, talking back to a teacher helped students preserve their dignity and gain status with their peers. Being "bad" is often linked to a student's reputation and attitude. Adults on campus, often confirming their expectations, scrutinize students with reputations of being "bad" more closely than other students. Arriaza concluded that the cultural mismatch between the students' preferred modes of behavior and the adults' cultural norms remain at the center of most conflict in the classroom.

In her ethnographic study in which she spent four years researching middle school and high school boys of color in inner-city Boston, Dance (2002) found that African-American youth established "postures of toughness" in order to survive on the streets. The researcher described three types of street-savvy students: hardcore, hardcore wannabe, and hard enough. The "hard enough" students lived in the neighborhood, but generally avoided trouble. Such students had no desire to become involved in a gang or engage in illegal activities, but they were unlikely to back down from threats and would fight as a last resort. The "hard enough" students were likely to be misunderstood by teachers and to be considered guilty by association.

Street-savvy students were capable of becoming "schoolwise," but the willingness to do so was based on a student's perception of teachers' understanding of the pressure students faced to act hardcore in their neighborhoods. Dance (2002) identified three types of teachers. 'Uncaring/unempathetic teachers' seemed not to care about students in general, and they did not understand the streets. Caring/unempathetic teachers cared about the students but did not understand the pressures of the street. Caring/empathetic teachers cared about the students, and they either understood the streets or cared enough to learn about the streets. Dance (2002) found that street-savvy students who were misunderstood were more likely to be suspended, expelled, or pushed out. Unempathetic teachers tended to mislabel street-savvy students as "irrationally disruptive and uneducable" (p. 47). Dance also found that street-savvy students who felt misunderstood were unlikely to cooperate with unempathetic teachers.

White teachers with limited exposure to African-American youth are more likely to rely on stereotypes from mass media and to be fearful of African-American boys as early as elementary school (Ferguson, 2001). Mass media works to cement the images of who is lazy and who is violent in our society. Two common stereotypes perpetuated in the mass media are that of the welfare freeloaders characterized by the "lazy Black mother" and that of the hyper-violent and sexualized Black male. When a teacher lacks knowledge of or exposure to cultures other than his or her own, verbal, behavioral, or physical misunderstandings are much more likely to occur (Meiners, 2007).

Despite the achievement and discipline gaps, Noguera (2008) found considerable evidence that the vast majority of African-American students want to do well in school. Ninety percent of African-American students agreed with the statements, "I think education is important"

and "I want to go to college," but only 18% agreed with the statement, "My teachers treat me fairly." He also found that there are schools where academic success for African-American students is the norm, not the exception. These schools work toward finding solutions rather than blaming students for their lack of success. Effective schools have been found to possess the following characteristics: a clear sense of purpose, a rigorous curriculum, high expectations, commitment to educate all students, a safe and orderly learning environment, a strong partnership with parents, and a problem solving attitude.

In his qualitative study involving 30 African-American students, Howard (2002) found that the closer the care in the classroom resembled the way that care is displayed at home, the more responsive students are. First, students responded positively to teachers who established daily rituals and classroom procedures that made them feel like a family. The second effective teaching strategy described by students is that of "culturally connected caring" or caring that is expressed in a way that students are familiar, such as a warm pat on the back or direct statements about the students' potential. Students also identified effective teachers as having a communication style that conveys caring and respect, and when the respect disappears, student responsiveness decreases dramatically.

According to the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge, valuable resources exist within the students' families and communities, and these resources can inform, improve, and contribute to curriculum content, instructional practices, and the effectiveness of school culture (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). By tapping into their students' funds of knowledge, educators will gain a better perspective on the backgrounds and strengths of their students so that they can make the learning more relevant and engaging for them. Cole (2005) recognized that

classroom interactions are imbedded in an enormous amount of social conditioning and recommended that teachers spend time in their school's community and invite community adults with special expertise into the school.

These relationships between the various environments can be strengthened by the use of culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom management practices. Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 29). A number of researchers have found that students' perceptions of how much the teacher cares for them is extremely important in terms of classroom behavior and academic achievement (Brown, 2003; Howard, 2002; Storz, 2008; Straus, 1992). Howard (2002) found that students were more responsive when care in the classroom resembled the way care was displayed in the students' homes and community.

Additional strategies for establishing culturally responsive classroom management practices include: establishing clear expectations for behavior, communicating with students in culturally consistent ways, working with families, and using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems (Weinstein et al., 2003).

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is not only a time characterized by immense hormonal and physical changes, it is also considered the transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is defined by the changes in identity and self-consciousness, and adolescents are known to be poor at decision-making, especially when risk is involved (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). Furthermore,

teenagers have a significant need to fit in and a fundamental need to belong, and Beaudoin (2005) argued that schools can meet this need simply by acknowledging its importance.

Evidence from developmental neuroscience has indicated that the brain structures of adolescents are less well developed than previously thought. Therefore, adolescents are more likely to take greater risks and reason less adequately about the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, certain characteristics of our school system are at odds with the developmental needs of adolescents such as the need for close peer relationships, autonomy, support from adults other than one's parents, identity negotiation, and academic self-efficacy (Eccles, 2004).

The rigidity inherent in zero tolerance policies expects absolute obedience, accepts no explanation or exception, and ignores student need for autonomy and support. Gregory and Cornell (2009) argued that schools must discipline students with an appropriate blend of structure and support, similar to an authoritative parenting style. Structure (monitoring of behavior) and support (warmth, acceptance, and respect for autonomy) are the hallmarks of the authoritative parenting style. Studies have found that teachers who offer both high structure and support are effective in gaining student cooperation, engagement, and high achievement (Brown, 2003; Ware, 2006). Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that African-American students had greater acceptance and were more cooperative with teachers they perceived as caring and as maintaining high academic expectations.

Noguera (2008) referred to the "fourth grade syndrome" in an effort to explain the tendency for the decline in academic performance of African-American males at the age of nine or ten. This is the age when African-American males begin to look like young men, and the

stereotypes of African-American males tend to receive magnified attention and scrutiny from teachers and other adults in authority.

The challenges of adolescence are compounded when there is a cultural mismatch between teachers and students. Ferguson (2001) found that when adults view African-American students through the lens of the cultural images of either criminals or endangered species, their actions become perceived as "adultified." No longer are they children acting in a developmentally appropriate manner or children making a mistake, their actions take on an intentional and sinister tone. This can be seen in the way that some adults talk about African-American elementary school students. For example, shortly after the riots in 1992, one teacher was discussing the loss of library books in her classroom and compared the situation to the looting that took place in Los Angeles. African-American boys are not allowed to be "naturally" naughty, and the "boys will be boys" mantra is not applied to them. Adults in schools often view certain body language and verbal rejoinders as a sign of insubordination.

Student Voice

Although Delpit (1995) cautioned readers to avoid the paternalistic view of "giving voice" to others, many educational researchers have acknowledged the need to actively seek out student input on school practices and policies that have such a tremendous effect on their lives. DeFur and Korinek (2010) found that student voice can be a powerful tool for school improvements. In their qualitative study, all of the 74 middle and high school students who participated wanted to discuss their schools and their education. They were able to identify themes such as community belonging and physical and psychological safety as being important to them. They also said that teachers make a difference and that instruction should be active, engaging, and meaningful. The

researchers found that the students' perceptions were quite similar to recognized experts such as faculty and researchers.

The term "student voice" emerged in the 1990s when educators and social critics began noticing that student voices were being excluded from conversations about learning and teaching (Cook-Sather, 2006). Cook-Sather defined student voice as a term that encourages the acknowledgement of students as having a meaningful presence and the "power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in school" (p. 363). She added, if students speak, then adults must listen, and the practice of listening to students can counter discriminatory tendencies in education. Learning and relations would improve if teachers really listened to students, which suggests that student voice is closely linked to school improvement.

Rudduck and Flutter (2000) argued that educators need to look at schools from the students' perspectives in order to effectively manage school improvement. The authors contend that pupils are very observant, yet educators rarely ask for the opinions. Educators can improve school structures and individual lessons by harnessing students' insight. Not only will students benefit from these improvements, but the very act of listening to students can also have a positive impact:

> Pupils' accounts of their experiences of being a learner in school can lead to changes that enable pupils to feel a stronger sense of commitment to the school and to the task of learning; and commitment can lead to enhanced effort and enhanced levels of attainment. (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 82)

Participation in research can be empowering. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) found that teachers and students who were frustrated with their school rarely had the opportunity to voice

their opinions in a meaningful manner. When given the chance to reflect on and discuss their work and their goals, teachers became more conscious of their interactions and choices in the classroom, and students were able to see themselves as valuable and knowledgeable stakeholders in their own educations.

In their interviews with elementary and secondary students across the country, Rudduck and Flutter (2000) found that students want to change the structures in their schools that "cast them in a marginal role and limit their agency" (p. 84). Students of all ages want more autonomy, and they want their schools to be fair.

In a study conducted in Sweden, Bergmark (2008) analyzed the written reflections of 25 seventh and eighth grade students to discover how they wished to be treated by others. The students and teachers agreed upon three themes that emerged in their writing: 1) respect, 2) appreciation, and 3) recognition. The researcher found the following themes: 1) to be acknowledged, recognized, and encouraged, 2) to be honest with one another, and 3) the importance of being accepted as who you are. Students discussed respect in both positive and negative aspects, and they seek mutually respectful relationships with their peers and teachers. The author argued that school can and should be a place where students learn how to respect others and how to acknowledge respectful behavior when it is shown to them.

Noguera (2008) cautioned educators and researchers not to cast African-American males in the role of helpless victims. If they are not acknowledged as having the capacity to make choices that will positively affect their lives, African-American males will continue to be marginalized. Noguera contended that the only way to begin to break the cycle of failure for

African-American males is to empower and involve them in addressing issues that affect them. Chapman (2005) concurred and indicated:

> Because adolescents make decisions that affect their entire lives while in high school, their thoughts and feelings toward their educational experiences are crucial to understanding their decision-making processes and creating counterstories that are absent from current educational research. (p. 39)

Student voice can be a powerful tool for school improvement and student engagement. Beaudoin (2005) has found that "schools that promote student voice reap benefits not only for individual students, but for school climate and public relations as well" (p. 2). The author also argued that student participation should be nonnegotiable:

> In our efforts to change schools for the better, we must strive to get students to become volunteers in school structures that often imprison them. We cannot hope to achieve the same level of motivation with inmates that we can with volunteers. Therefore, we must find ways to give our students a spirit of volunteerism. (p. 18)

Conclusion

A review of the literature indicated that males have been overrepresented in school suspensions and expulsions for decades. Zero tolerance policies, which grew out of the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1986 and the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, have contributed to the increased use of suspension and expulsion. However, the majority of students are suspended for disruption or defiance, not for violent acts or for drug use or possession.

The vast majority of discipline events begin in the classroom, where the teacher has the discretion to deal with the problematic behavior or refer the student to the office. Numerous

scholars argue that the cultural mismatch between teachers—who are predominately White females—and their students is the root of the problem. Culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom management practices were shown to make learning more relevant and engaging to students, and thus reduce discipline problems.

The use of suspension and expulsion has been associated with problems such as low academic achievement, lower high school graduation rates, and entry into the juvenile justice system. The literature review indicated that students want a safe learning environment and are able to identify practices in school that can contribute to a community of caring and safety. Involving students in the process and listening to their concerns and suggestions is key to improving discipline practices at a school site.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives and narratives of eleven African-American male middle school students in an urban public school with students from predominately low-income household. This study sought to discover how African-American middle school students interpret and perceive their experiences with the disciplinary process at school. This study also aimed to uncover how African-American students perceive and understand the impact of the school disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives.

A critical narrative design was used because it aligns with the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy and is best suited to answer the research questions. Noguera (2008) found that students recognize the need for safety and order in their schools, and they want to see disruptive students dealt with firmly. However, schools very rarely seek student input on matters related to discipline. Interviewing middle school students in an effort to discover how they make sense of their experiences related to school discipline and the impact of these punitive measures on their personal and academic lives allowed for collecting and analyzing data that is richly descriptive and allows for depth of understanding (McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Merriam, 2002).

This chapter discusses the research design, its rationale, theoretical underpinnings, site selection, data collection and analysis, a description of the research site, and how participants were selected. In addition, issues of credibility, transferability, and dependability are addressed.

Research Questions

To gain a better understanding of the disciplinary practices in middle school from the perspective of African-American male students who have been disciplined for defiance more than once in the past school year, the following questions were addressed:

1. How do African-American students perceive and describe their experiences with the teacher disciplinary referral process at a large, urban, public middle school?
2. How do African-American students perceive the impact of the school disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives?

Research Design

Qualitative Methodology

To explore the unique and complex experiences and perspectives of middle school students, qualitative methodology was used. Qualitative research is based on a view that meaning is socially constructed and that multiple realities exist. These realities are created by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002). This study sought to discover how middle school students make sense of their experiences related to school discipline, and qualitative research methods allow for collecting and analyzing data that is richly descriptive and allows for depth of understanding (McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Merriam, 2002).

As students are the ones who are affected by school discipline practices and procedures, it is important that their voices are heard on the matter. The qualitative design of this study was crucial to providing insight into the experiences and perspectives of African-American middle school students.

Narrative inquiry. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative inquiry is a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience because humans lead storied lives. The authors described narrative as the "construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories" (p. 2), and therefore narrative inquiry is well suited to the field of education. Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that "experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi).

Hendry (2010) viewed narrative as a structure for organizing our knowledge and experience and considered it to be the primary process of all inquiry. He labeled narratives that seek to respond to the human experience as "symbolic" narratives and maintained that there are "multiple ways of coming to know" (p. 76). Narrative can be powerful because it has the potential to remind us of the many and complex ways in which humans make meaning from their experiences.

Critical narrative. The narratives of eleven African-American male students were used to bring awareness to the inequities that exist in the discipline practices at one middle school. According to Moss (2004), critical narrative "suggests a moral or ethical consideration when referring to social and cultural issues that identify human status and social structure" (p. 363). She also described critical narrative research as a social action that allows multiple voices to flourish. Carspecken (1996) portrayed critical research as a means to help refine social policy, and considered it to be well suited to studies concerned with issues of social structure, power, culture, and human agency.

The goals of critical inquiry are to critique, challenge, transform and empower. Moss (2004) used the term critical to describe "culture, language, and participation as issues of power in need of critique with the intent of emendation or alteration in the direction of social justice and participatory democracy" (p. 363). Research questions are framed in terms of power, and it is assumed that people often unconsciously accept things the way they are, and thus, reinforce the status quo. Data were analyzed to reveal the underlying assumptions and to "uncover and challenge the assumptions and social structures that oppress" (Merriam, 2002, p. 328).

Critical researchers share a certain orientation to values that guide their studies. Those value assumptions include: research should be employed in cultural and social criticism and support efforts for change; certain groups in any society are privileged over other groups; research should be used to uncover the subtleties of oppression so that those affected by it are made aware; oppression has many faces; and mainstream research practices are often unwittingly part of the oppression (Carspecken, 1996).

Critical narrative was used to integrate a variety of stories and experiences that illuminate the students' perspectives on school discipline policies and practices, which are not often taken into account in practice or research.

Research Setting

The Homewood School District (pseudonym) is a K-8 district with seven elementary schools, three middle schools, and one charter high school in Los Angeles County. The median household income of the city at the time of the study was $44,906. This study was conducted at Meadows Middle School (also a pseudonym), where the researcher was the assistant principal. During the period of data collection, 962 students were enrolled in grades six, seven and eight,

including 8.5% students with disabilities, 44% English learners, and 92% socioeconomically disadvantaged. At that time, 69% of the student body was Hispanic, 23% was African American, and the remaining students were Asian (2.9%), White (2%), Filipino (1.4%), Pacific Islander (1%), and multi-racial (0.5%). Forty-three fully credentialed teachers were on staff at Meadows Middle School (MMS). The majority of teachers were White females (37%). Overall, the teaching staff was 63% female and 37% male; 55% White, 30% Hispanic, and 11% African American. There was only one Asian teacher on staff at the time of the study. Both administrators were White females, and the counselor was an African-American female.

The physical plant at MMS is not typical of the more traditional-looking schools in the surrounding area. The school was newly constructed in 2007, with classrooms housed in a three-story brick, metal, and glass building. Classrooms have high ceilings and exposed pipes, and four classrooms are clustered together around a small lobby, which is commonly referred to as the pod. Sixth grade classrooms are on the third floor, seventh graders are on the second floor, and eighth graders on the first floor. The library, which has three walls of windows, is on the second floor. The building is a horseshoe shape with a large open area on the ground floor, called the quad. There is a tile mural on one wall of the building, potted flowers, and patio chairs in a variety of bright colors. This is a popular place for students to congregate during lunch. Across the way from the mural is a bench, which is popular with the teachers at lunch.

In an attempt to combat declining enrollment in the middle schools, the District converted all three of its middle schools to academies in 2011. Meadows Middle School became a Fine Arts Academy, while another middle school in the District became a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Academy, and the other became a Business Academy. Although

students in the Homewood School District can attend the middle school of their choice, the vast majority of students attend their home school. Meadows Middle School offered the following elective classes: visual arts, yearbook, theater arts, chorus, piano, orchestra, band, and general music. At events such as Back to School Night and Open House, students in the orchestra, band, chorus, and theater arts perform for visitors in the quad area that was described above. Piano recitals are held in classrooms at the end of each trimester.

At the time of the study, Meadows Middle School was in its fourth year of Program Improvement (PI). Based on the Academic Performance Index (API) data, the school received a low statewide rank of four out of ten, but a higher ranking of nine out of ten when compared to similar schools. In the 2012-2013 school year, 51% of the students were proficient or advanced in language arts and 47% were proficient or advanced in mathematics. The school achieved an API score of 761. API scores can range from 200 to 1000, and the state has set a target score of 800 for all schools to meet.

During the 2012-2013 school year, there was a suspension rate of 22% with 215 suspensions. Although African-American students comprised only 23% of the student population, they accounted for approximately 50% of all suspensions.

Participants and Sampling Criteria

This critical narrative study employed purposeful and homogeneous sampling to ensure that the participants had substantial experience and information to share on the topic (Polkinghorne, 2005). Since the purpose of the study was to highlight the voices of African-American boys, study participants who have recently been involved in school discipline were selected for their input. Homogeneous sampling provided the necessary focus while also

obtaining unique descriptions from individual participants (Merriam, 2002). Referral data were used to invite students to participate in this study. Participants for the individual interviews and the focus group were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: 1) African-American males, 2) current eighth grade, general education students at Meadows Middle School; 3) attended Meadows Middle School for at least six months at the time the study began, and 5) received one or more office referrals for defiance or disruption in the classroom while enrolled at MMS.

Access

From the moment this research project was proposed, the principal at Meadows Middle School was supportive and eager for the research to be conducted at the school site. The superintendent of the Homewood School District (HSD) granted permission as well. As the assistant principal at the site, the researcher had access to referral and suspension data. In addition, she had built relationships with the students, parents, and staff at the school. The researcher had worked in the HSD for 15 years and had held the positions of classroom teacher, literacy coach, and assistant principal at the elementary level, before becoming the assistant principal at the middle school level. Academic Year 2012-2013 was the researcher's fourth year as an assistant principal and her second year at MMS. The researcher had known many of the current students at Meadows Middle School and their families since the students were in kindergarten.

Methods of Data Collection

Field texts are the primary source of data in narrative studies. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to data as field texts because they are created by participants and researchers and

represent certain aspects of an experience. According to Clandinin and Connelly, the following can be used to create field texts: autobiographical writing, journal writing, field notes, letters, conversations, research interview, documents, photographs, and life experiences. This study employed field notes, documents, and research interview transcripts.

Document Analysis

Office referrals. Teacher-generated office referrals were used for two purposes. First, office referrals were used as one of the criteria to select participants. African-American male students currently enrolled in the eighth grade who had received one or more office referral for defiance were invited to participate in the study. During the interviews, students were asked to reflect on why they think they had received office referrals. Second, office referrals were used to compare students' perceptions of the reason for their referral to the teachers' perceptions of the student behavior that led to the referral.

I collected office referrals written by teachers and took handwritten notes on some of these referrals. These notes became part of my researcher's journal, which also included notes on my observations and conversations with students, both participants and non-participants. I also studied the California Education Code and District and school site documents related to student discipline, including HSD school board policy, the *Student Handbook of Rights and Responsibilities*, and school and classroom rules.

Researcher's journal. The researcher kept a detailed journal during the entire data collection period (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hatch, 2002). Field notes, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), aid the researcher in moving back and forth between full involvement with participants and distance from them. These notes, observations, and

reflections were collected after conversations with students and staff, and as overall impressions after each day. These daily notes are important and full of details, which allow researchers to "tell stories of our story experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104).

Interviews

The interviews with eight African-American male middle school students were the crux of this critical narrative study. According to Van Manen (1990), the interview serves two specific purposes: 1) to gather material that may provide deeper understanding of a human phenomenon and 2) to understand the meaning of the participant's experience. Interviews can be used to explore how participants organize their experiences and make sense of their world. Often these structures are taken for granted by participants and are hidden from direct observation (Hatch, 2002). The interviews provided important insights into the students' experiences, interpretations, and perspectives of school discipline. Memories can be influenced by one's current mood and influenced by suggestions. Thus, the purpose of the interviews was not to produce factually accurate recalls of specific events, but to allow for the students to reflect on the meaning of those events (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Carspecken (1996) recommended that critical ethnographers begin at the concrete level by encouraging participants to describe a specific action or event. Next, the researcher is advised to work toward the verbalization of "interpretative schema" that can be used in many different situations.

Participant selection. This study utilized convenience and purposive sampling methods in order to ensure that students who could speak about the issues were part of the sample. A total of eight African-American males participated in the individual interviews. Participants were

chosen based on the following criteria: 1) African-American males, 2) current eighth grade, general education students at Meadows Middle School; 3) attended Meadows Middle School for at least six months at the time the study begins, and 5) received one or more office referral for defiance or disruption in the classroom while enrolled at MMS.

First, in June 2014, I did a query in the school's data management system for African-American male students currently enrolled in the eighth grade with one office referral or more. Out of a total of 331 eighth grade students, 24 students met my criteria. Next, I examined the list for students who I thought would be comfortable talking to me about this topic. I based this decision on how long I had known each boy and on our prior conversations, both in formal (the office) and informal (yard, hallways, and cafeteria) settings. I repeated this same process again in September 2014. Out of a total of 324 eighth grade students enrolled at the time, 15 students met my criteria. I had known three of the participants since they were in elementary school. Two of the boys were cousins, and I decided to interview only one of them to avoid conversations about the study at home.

Second, I called parents/guardians to gain their consent. I made the phone calls from school, so that parents would recognize the telephone number, but after my contractual hours. Only one parent denied permission for her son to participate, and I was unable to reach several parents. I gained consent from the parents/guardians of four boys in June and four additional boys in September, and each one gave me verbal permission to speak to his or her son and send home the consent forms.

Next, I spoke to each of the eight boys individually. I explained my study and asked if they would be willing to participate. Da'wan and Devante (pseudonyms) were both very eager

to participate, and the other six were more hesitant. I answered questions and assured each boy that even though his parent or guardian said that he could participate, the decision was his. I sent home the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix A.), Subject's Bill of Rights (See Appendix B.), and the Summary of Project for Student Participants (See Appendix C.). When I received the signed consent form, I scheduled a time for the interview.

Data collection. I interviewed four of the participants in June of 2014, and four participants in October and November of 2014. All participants were current eighth grade students at the time of their interview. Interviews were held in the conference room in the library afterschool and were scheduled at the convenience of each participant. This allowed for convenient access for both the researcher and the participant, and the conference room is a comfortable, quiet space. Each interview was scheduled to be one hour, but most lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. I utilized an interview protocol (See Appendix D.) to guide the conversations, yet I responded to each participant by adding and deleting questions as needed. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Refreshments such as water, Gatorade, and snacks were provided at each meeting, and at each meeting each participant was reminded of his anonymity and the researcher's confidentiality in this research project. The researcher asked open-ended questions and listened very intently without passing any judgment on their account of the incident or on their behavior.

Possible lead-off questions were formulated to align with each of the research questions. According to Carspecken (1996), lead-off questions should be designed to open up a topic domain the researcher wants to address in the interview. These questions should be very concrete, and if possible, based on an event the researcher has recently observed the subject take

part in. Possible lead-off questions for the first research question (regarding behaviors, actions, and expressions that trigger disciplinary referrals) included:

1. How would you define defiance?
2. Have you been told recently that you were being defiant? What happened?
3. Can you give an example of something that's happened recently in your classroom that you thought was defiant?
4. How do you think your teachers define defiance?
5. Is the definition the same in every classroom?
6. Are the consequences the same in every classroom?

Before the second interview, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and field notes so that any necessary follow-up or clarifying questions could be asked. This also allowed for a "member check" in which the participant could determine if the account was accurate thus far (Creswell, 2014). The participant also had the opportunity to add any newly remembered information or additional thoughts on the topic.

The researcher then moved on to attempting to answer the second research question, regarding the impact of school discipline on the student's academic and personal life. Possible lead-off questions for the second interview included:

1. What are the consequences of an office referral?
2. What happens while you are in the office? How do you feel while in the office?
3. What happens at home? Why do you think your parents reacted that way?
4. What happens when you return to that class?
5. Do you expect to stay in school until you graduate? Why? Why not?

6. Do you think that getting kicked out of class or being suspended will have any effect on your staying in school? On your behavior in school?
7. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
8. Do you think you will graduate from high school? Will you go to college? Will you have a job?

Focus Group

In order to supplement and triangulate the data collected through interviews, I also conducted a focus group. Hatch (2002) defined focus groups as "sets of individuals with similar characteristics or having shared experiences who sit down with a moderator to discuss a topic" (p. 24). In addition, focus groups have served to supplement other qualitative data such as interviews, and the group interaction can produce new data and insights (Hatch, 2002). Madriz (2000) suggested,

> Focus groups minimize the control of the researcher during the data gathering process by decreasing the power of the researcher over the participants. The collective nature of the group interview empowers the participants and validates their voices and experiences. (p. 838)

Possible lead-off questions for the focus group included:

1. Have you recently been told that you were being defiant? What happened?
2. How do you think your teachers define defiance?
3. Are the consequences for defiant behavior the same in every classroom?
4. How do you feel when you get an office referral?
5. What happens at home when you get in trouble at school?

Participant selection. The focus group took place in December 2014 after all of the data from the interviews had been coded and analyzed. Participants were chosen based on the same criteria used to select participants for the interview: 1) African-American males, 2) current eighth grade, general education students at Meadows Middle School; 3) attended Meadows Middle School for at least six months at the time the study begins, and 5) received one or more office referral for defiance or disruption in the classroom while enrolled at MMS.

I selected three boys who were new to the study, and I invited the four boys who I had interviewed in the fall of 2014 to participate in the focus group. One boy, Vance, was absent on the day of the focus group, so the focus group consisted of six participants, three who had been interviewed previously and three who had not.

The boys seemed more comfortable among their peers and spoke more freely than they had in the individual interviews. The meeting was held in an unused classroom during lunch, and pizza, chips, and soda were served at the conclusion of the interview, which was audio recorded.

Methods of Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the data are mediated through the researcher, who is the main vehicle for collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002). Data collected through interviews, focus group, and document analysis were inductively analyzed to identify recurring patterns or common themes. Hatch (2002) defined inductive data analysis as "a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p. 161).

As shown in Table 2, the steps outlined in Hatch (2002) are very comprehensive, yet they give the researcher flexibility to create domains and codes that emerge from the data collected, rather than from the researcher. Hatch (2002) also suggested completing these steps while collecting the data so that the researcher can observe how each part of the data collection process influences the analysis. He argued that although inductive analysis should not be used for all types of qualitative work, its strength lies in "its power to get meaning from complex data that have been gathered with a broad focus in mind" (Hatch, 2002, p. 179).

Table 2
Steps in Inductive Analysis

1. Read the data and identify frames of analysis.
2. Create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis.
3. Identify salient domains, assign them a code, and put others aside.
4. Reread data, refining salient domains and keeping a record of where relationships are found in the data.
5. Decide if your domains are supported by the data and search data for examples that do not fit with or run counter to the relationships in your domains.
6. Complete an analysis within domains.
7. Search for themes across domains.
8. Create a master outline expressing relationships within and among domains.
9. Select data excerpts to support the elements of your outline.

Note. Adapted from *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*, by J. A. Hatch, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. Used with permission.

In addition to following the steps outlined above, the researcher developed a qualitative codebook as recommended by Creswell (2014). Creswell also advised that the researcher look for the following when he or she begins coding:

1. Codes on topics the reader would expect based on the literature and common sense.
2. Codes that are surprising or were not anticipated.
3. Codes that are unusual. (pp. 198-199)

As the data were collected, the researcher transcribed and read the data and noted the

themes that were emerging. This process continued until all of the data together presented a story of the experiences of the participants in this study.

Document Analysis

I used the office referrals at the beginning of the study to select participants as well as to create questions for the interviews and focus group. I continued to analyze the office referrals as well as the other documents during the months and added them to the index of codes.

Interviews

Data analysis was on-going throughout the data collection process. After each interview, I listened to the audio recording and took notes on emerging themes and possible follow-up questions. I also used these notes to revise the interview protocol for the remaining interviews. All of the interview transcripts were read and reviewed by me several times, and coded for themes first by hand and then by using the computer software MAXQDA (2014, version 11.141220). Themes emerged from the interview data, and when I reached the point where no new themes were emerging, I decided to conduct a focus group.

Focus Group

I listened to the focus group audio recording that evening, took notes, and transcribed it over the next several days. I uploaded the transcription into MAXQDA and began coding for themes. Although a few new themes emerged, the majority of the codes matched the existing codes from the interviews. The focus group also served the purpose of triangulating the data in order to create validity for the study.

Criteria of Trustworthiness

Qualitative studies are not experimental in design, and therefore, the criteria for determining the validity and reliability of the study are different than in a quantitative study. A qualitative case study that relies on studying natural settings to construct truths can be deemed trustworthy if the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability are addressed.

Credibility

Instrumentation and researcher bias are two threats that are especially troublesome to qualitative research, and in qualitative research, the construction of reality is multi-faceted and the researcher, as a human, interprets the reality of the participants through observations and interviews (Merriam, 2002).

The literature on qualitative research pointed to criteria that enhance the credibility of a study (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002). The criteria can include: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checks (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). By meeting these criteria, the credibility of this study was enhanced.

Prolonged engagement. Prolonged engagement refers to a "lengthy and intensive contact with the phenomena (participants) in the field" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77). The data collection, including interviews, document analysis, and focus groups spanned a time period of seven months. Time was spent collecting the data, asking questions, coding the data, and then repeating the process. The researcher who had worked in the Homewood School District for 15 years, and as an administrator at the research site for two years, assumed a participant-observer role. The understanding she has gained of the staff, students, and families in the District throughout the years provided scope, and the observations provided depth to the study.

Member Checks. According to Hatch (2002) and Merriam (2002), member checks consist of giving participants an opportunity to see the data before it is presented in its final form. After conducting the interviews of individual students, each participant reviewed a copy of his interview transcript. In addition, the researcher asked each participant about topics that remained unclear after the first interview or repeated a question of importance to ensure that the respondent gave similar answers during both interviews. The use of member checks allowed the researcher to verify that the themes emerging from the data were true to the perspectives of the students.

Triangulation. Triangulation is a process of using multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple methods to confirm the findings in a study (Merriam, 2002). By interviewing multiple participants, different perspectives can be taken into account. According to Polkinghorne (2005), using multiple participants "serves as a kind of triangulation on the experience, locating its core meaning by approaching it through different accounts" (p. 140). In addition to perspectives from multiple participants, data from the researcher's journal, disciplinary referrals, and a focus group were examined.

Negative Case Analysis. Because reality includes different viewpoints that do not always come together, Creswell (2014) suggested that the researcher should present all information even if that data contradicts the general perceptions emerging in the data. By presenting data that counters the general themes emerging, the case study will become more realistic and credible.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is similar to generalizability in quantitative research, and causes readers of a study to ask, "What can this study teach us about our students or schools?" McMillan and Wergin (2010) believed that the "best studies are complete enough and rich enough that readers are able to judge which findings and insights might be most applicable to their own settings" (p. 92). The thick descriptions of the experiences of the students served to make this critical narrative more generalizable.

Various factors may affect the transferability of this study. First, this was a study of the experiences of 11 students at one middle school in Los Angeles County. Second, the participants themselves may have represented different mindsets than other students at the same school or students in different schools or contexts. Finally, transferability may be affected because every school has a unique culture and set of disciplinary policies and procedures. Although this critical narrative explored the unique experiences of students at one middle school, the literature suggested that many schools across the country are facing challenges in regards to the overuse of exclusionary discipline for certain populations. Acknowledging the limitations to the transferability of this study, and addressing the areas that make it generalizable enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is similar to reliability in quantitative research, which refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated (Merriam, 2002). Instead of outlining the steps taken so that others may replicate this study, the researcher focused on making sure that the results made sense. Creswell's (2014) recommendations were followed,

and the researcher checked the transcripts carefully, ensuring that there was no drift in the definition of codes, and the codes were cross-checked.

Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, it is acknowledged that bias is not necessarily a problem. Bias simply reflects ways in which people make meaning of the world, and thus, needs to be acknowledged. By doing so, the researcher allows room for others to have different interpretations. Positionality and reflexivity are two ways of dealing with researcher bias in qualitative research (McMillan & Wergin, 2010).

Researcher Positionality

Aware of my privilege as a middle-class, White woman, I made a deliberate choice to begin my teaching career in a low-income, urban school in the South Bronx, New York. I have continued to work in low-income, urban schools for over twenty years because of a strong belief that through education we have the ability to create conditions of empowerment that will make our society more just and equitable.

This research project was borne out of my frustration at seeing the chairs outside of my office occupied disproportionately by African-American males waiting to see me, with a discipline referral in hand. The vast majority of those referrals have been for "defiance" and/or "disrupting the learning process."

Positionality forces one to "acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects" (Madison, 2012, p. 8). As the assistant principal and primary disciplinarian at the research site, I am aware of my power, real and perceived. My position as the primary disciplinarian at the school site has the potential to

affect the responses from the students. However, I have known many of the students since they were in kindergarten and building relationships with students has always been one of my strengths.

Before, during, and since the data collection procedures were implemented, it has been my routine to stand outside supervising students before and after school and during lunch every day. I do so in a friendly manner, striking up conversations with students whenever I can. Many of the boys on campus will shake my hand or give me a "fist bump" as they walk by and say, "Hello!" Some even teach me a somewhat complicated handshake that they use with their friends. There is friendly laughter, as I attempt to master the new handshake.

When a student comes to my office with an office referral or because he or she was involved in an altercation with another student, I always give him or her the opportunity to tell me what happened from their perspective. Boys are almost always respectful and explain what happened in language that they know I will understand. After a fight, a boy might tell me that the other student said that he wanted to fight him. When I ask him, "What exactly did the other boy say?", he might answer, "He said, 'I want your hands' or 'Let's go body.'"

One day in the spring, I happened to see Jamal (pseudonym), an eighth grade student, as he was entering the health clerk's office. He had told his teacher that he was sick and had a pass. When he saw me, he asked if he could work in the office during this period. Jamal said that he had a problem with a student in the class and could not stay in the room. I asked him if he wanted help solving the problem, but he declined the offer. After he promised that this would be the only day he would do this, I agreed to let Jamal work in the office. Later that day, I asked the security guard, who had a good relationship with Jamal, to check in on him. He discovered that

the problem was with a girl, and I never heard any more about it. Jamal kept his word and never asked to work in the office again.

My understanding of the school culture and positive relationship with the participants allowed me to listen to the participants intently without judgment and create a study environment where participants shared freely, rather than my presence serving as a limitation. Through the use of researcher journals and bracketing in field notes, I was able to respond and reflect on the data in order to limit the amount of bias.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of self-reflection that a qualitative researcher undergoes because he/she is not an objective scientist (Hatch, 2002). Because researchers become part of the world they study, they must keep track of their influence on a setting. Therefore, tracking biases through bracketing in field notes and the researcher's journal, and monitoring emotional responses, allows the researcher enough closeness to the participants that enable them to understand the phenomenon (Hatch, 2002).

Because the researcher was a participant in the school under study, a strict set of field notes that included observer comments in brackets was maintained. Another important aspect of reflexivity was the use of a researcher journal as ongoing informal data analysis. Practices were put in place that allowed the researcher to reflect on her role as researcher and not interfere with the analysis.

Conclusion

By using a qualitative methodology with a critical narrative design, this study explored African-American males' experiences of school discipline practices. To maintain the

trustworthiness of this study, various types of data were collected over a period of seven months, and an inductive analysis was utilized to uncover emerging themes. In addition, the researcher's positionality as a current administrator at MMS was disclosed and opportunities for reflexivity were put in place in order to limit the inherent biases. Chapter Four describes the data and findings of this study, and Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings and their implications for discipline procedures and practices.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The Context for this Study

Exclusionary discipline practices have had a disparate impact on African-American males, and researchers have documented this problem for over 30 years. Students who have been suspended more than once are more likely to become disengaged from school, which can lead to lower grades, lower high school graduation rates, and entry into the juvenile justice system. Practitioners and politicians have also taken note of the problem recently.

Many people, inside and outside of the field of education, assume that students are suspended primarily for dangerous behaviors such as fighting or possession of drugs, alcohol, or weapons. Students are suspended for those serious offenses, however, the majority of suspensions are actually for defiance of school rules or defiance of adult authority as stated in the California Education Code. Suspendable offenses under this category are not clearly defined but can include not doing schoolwork, talking, chewing gum, or wearing a hat or hood in the classroom.

Rarely are the voices of students heard in this critical conversation. It is important that those who are most greatly impacted by school policies related to exclusionary discipline be involved in the conversation.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

This critical narrative study focused on African-American male middle school students' experiences with and perceptions of school disciplinary practices. Due to the serious consequences related to exclusionary discipline practices such as lower achievement rates, lower

high school graduation rates, and entry into the School-to-Prison Pipeline, it is crucial to have an understanding of the perspectives of those who are directly affected by the problem.

Research Questions

This study focused on the school's disciplinary practices from the perspective of African-American male students. The following questions were addressed:

1. How do African-American students perceive and describe their experiences with the teacher disciplinary referral process at a large, urban, public middle school?
2. How do African-American students perceive the impact of the school disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives?

The Research Process

The qualitative approach of critical narrative was used to make meaning from students' experiences, which occur at a particular time, in a particular personal and social context, while also exposing, critiquing, and transforming inequalities. Critical narrative research captures both the individual perspective and the context of participants, in an effort to produce meaning and understanding, which are created when voices are in dialogue with each other (Moen, 2006). Since there is limited research that studies the students' experiences and perspectives of exclusionary discipline policies in school, this critical narrative provided an in-depth examination of those unique experiences.

Setting

The Homewood School District (HSD) is a small urban district located in Los Angeles County that serves approximately 10,000 students with seven elementary schools, three middle schools, and one charter high school. African Americans made up 21.6% of the District's

student population, but 52% of all suspensions during the 2011-2012 school year. Sixty-four percent of all suspensions were for defiance. Because of this disparity, District and site-level administrators began examining the data and discussing alternatives to suspension for acts of defiance during the 2012-2013 school year. While no District policies have been amended officially, there has been an agreement to limit the use of suspension for offenses related to defiance.

The research was conducted at Meadows Middle School (MMS) where the researcher was the assistant principal and primary disciplinarian at the time of the study. MMS is a public middle school located in Los Angeles County that serves low-income students in grades six through eight with an enrollment of 935 students. Ninety percent of the students qualify for a free or reduced lunch. The majority of students are Hispanic (69%), 23% of the students are African American, and African-American students received 52% of the office referrals during the 2011-2012 school year.

The current school building was built approximately ten years ago and is a very modern design. It is a three-story building with twelve classrooms on each floor. Four classrooms share a small lobby area commonly referred to as the "pod." There is a counter against one wall that spans between two classrooms. Many teachers use the pod as a time-out area, and some teachers use the area as a place to have a private conversation with a student.

Participants

This study explored the experiences of African-American male students at MMS. Eleven different individuals participated in this study. Eight were interviewed individually, and three of these eight students also participated in the focus group with three additional students (See Table

3.). All of the participants had been enrolled in MMS for more than two years and were in the eighth grade at the time of the study.

Table 3
Participants in the Study

Pseudonym	Participation	No. of Referrals Grades 6-8	No. of Suspensions Grades 6-8	Grade Point Average
Da'wan	Interview and Focus Group	23	6	1.0
Devante	Interview and Focus Group	4	0	1.8
Jamal	Interview	26	5	1.6
Jason	Interview	5	0	2.0
Keon	Interview	5	3	1.8
Mathias	Focus Group	1	2	2.0
Michael	Interview	6	5	2.3
Rashan	Focus Group	3	0	2.5
Sayon	Focus Group	7	0	2.0
Tavion	Interview and Focus Group	5	0	2.4
Vance	Interview	21	2	3.0

The participants in this study were 13 or 14 years old, and they had each received at least one office referral for defiance while enrolled at MMS. I had known three of the participants since they were in elementary school. I became acquainted with five of the boys when they were in the sixth grade and three of the boys when they were in the seventh grade.

Da'wan. Da'wan was 13 years old at the time of the study and was of average height and had a slight build. He had very thin legs, and one leg was thinner than the other. He did not walk with a limp, but I had heard some students refer to Da'wan as the "boy with the leg" or

"sticks." He had dark skin, short hair, and was always neatly dressed, with matching outfits, and his clothes were always clean and neatly pressed. He often wore cargo shorts and a polo shirt in a bright color.

Da'wan attended school in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) prior to enrolling in MMS in the sixth grade. Da'wan had received a total of 23 office referrals while enrolled at MMS. He received 10 office referrals in the sixth grade, 11 referrals in the seventh grade, and two during the first trimester of the eighth grade.

During his first trimester of seventh grade Da'wan's language arts teacher was on maternity leave, and the class had a long-term substitute teacher from September through December. The substitute teacher wrote eight of the 11 referrals Da'wan received that year, and two of those office referrals resulted in suspension. She had asked Da'wan to pass out textbooks to the class, and Da'wan did not like the way one student took a book from him. As a result Da'wan, chased that student around the room, and then placed him in a headlock. A few weeks later, the same teacher asked Da'wan to pass out textbooks again, and he hit another student in the head with a textbook. Da'wan's behavior was unacceptable and dangerous, but after the first incident, I questioned the teacher's judgment in allowing him to pass out textbooks a second time.

The two office referrals Da'wan received in the eighth grade were from his math teacher. In the first one, the teacher wrote, "Da'wan threw a ball at another student. When the teacher asked for the ball, Da'wan threw the ball toward the front of the room telling the teacher to 'Keep it.'" The second office referral was for "using words such as 'fuck,' 'shit,' and 'go back to your country' towards a classmate in the middle of class work."

I interviewed Da'wan in November of his eighth grade year, at which time he had a grade point average of 1.0 and had received unsatisfactory behavior marks in four out of seven classes. I brought Gatorade, chips and Sour Punch candy to each interview for the participant. Most of the other boys took one or two things with them when they left the interview. Da'wan was the only boy to actually eat or drink any of it during the interview, and he ate everything that I brought. Sometimes he was difficult to understand because he was eating or playing with the Gatorade bottle. He also made several references to food throughout the interviews.

He had many questions about the eighth grade dances and graduation ceremony. He credits his improved behavior to being in the eighth grade because participating in the school dances and the graduation ceremony is dependent on good behavior and grades. When asked what he thought about his own behavior in school, Da'wan answered, "My behavior is good. It's just that I've just got to stop talking and stop playing around. Just do my work" (Interview One).

I told Da'wan and all of the participants that the data show that African Americans are getting suspended at higher rates than any other group, and that the majority of the suspensions are for defiance. Da'wan could not believe this and said, "Wait a second. Are you saying most kids get suspended for defiance? I thought it was for mostly fighting. I thought fighting and smoking happens more" (Interview One). He was also very interested in the consequences of smoking on campus and said, "Wait. So if you smoke, how many days? I'm not saying I smoke. I'm just saying" (Interview One).

Da'wan defined defiance as being disrespectful, not doing your work, and not following directions of the staff and gave this example, "If they tell you to do something, like don't chew gum in class, and you do it anyway" (Interview One). He went on to say that "kids and adults

think different, and every teacher in the school doesn't have the same rules" (Interview One). Da'wan acknowledged that adapting to the various rules and expectations of his teachers was difficult, but he was resigned to this fact and said, "But everything can't be the same. If that was the case the world would be perfect" (Interview Two).

Da'wan remarked that he wished teachers would not send students out of the room so often because "even though the kids were doing what they weren't suppose to do, they still need an education" (Interview One). Da'wan reported feeling bad when he gets sent out of the room either on a time-out or on an office referral because "I lose my education, and I should never have did what I did" (Interview Two).

Da'wan said he believes that it is more effective for teachers to call his mom than to send him out of the room, but he also said that strategy does not work for all students, and some kids will come back the next day and do the same thing. When he gets in trouble at school, his mom gets mad because "she knows that I can do better if I just try and do my best" (Interview One). His mom grounds him, and he is not allowed to watch television, use electronics, or go to the park and play with his friends.

Da'wan admitted to talking and playing too much in class. When asked why, he said that he does not want to do the work. He explained that in one class, "It's the same thing every week. It's just packets, and we do a page a day" (Interview Two).

His behavior would improve if teachers asked students how they would like to be taught and "change up their ways" (Interview One). He compared it to his mother making dinner. When she asks him what he wants he wants to eat, less food gets wasted. He also suggested that his math teacher bring in pizza when they are learning about fractions.

Education is important to Da'wan "because if you don't have an education you won't be able to have a job or have a house or live a life" (Interview Two). He said he plans on going to college and wants to play basketball in the NBA or be an FBI agent. He reported understanding that missing class time, either for an office referral or for a suspension, can lead to a lower grade because he is missing instructional time.

Da'wan could be more easy-going than the descriptions on many of his office referrals would indicate. One day during dismissal, Da'wan was chasing a girl, and when he saw me he told me that the girl was bothering him. I pointed out that the girl was actually running away from him and suggested that he "let it go." Immediately, Da'wan began singing "Let it Go" from the Disney movie *Frozen* and danced toward the dismissal gate.

Devante. I first met Devante when he was in first grade when I was the literacy coach at the elementary school he attended. I worked there until he was in third grade. We met again when we began our middle school careers together, he as a sixth grader, and I as assistant principal. He was the most loquacious of all the participants, which did not surprise me.

Devante had a small build and big personality, and he was well-liked by the staff and his peers. He was very polite and well-spoken when in the office, but outside I would often hear him swearing or rapping about male genitalia. His usual response when he saw me was to blame a nearby student while imitating me by saying, "Language!" or "You know that is not appropriate language for school." He was good-natured, and everyone was in on the joke, including the student who he blamed for his inappropriate language.

Devante's mother is deceased, and he lived with his father, his aunt, and his two cousins. Many people in the community had identified his father as an active gang member. On two

occasions in the past three years, Devante's father had come into the school office and yelled, cursed and threatened to harm students and staff. The local police were called both times to escort him off campus. I have seen Devante upset, but I have never heard him curse in anger. The office secretaries and visitors to campus have often commented on how respectful Devante is and how he always answers them with a "yes ma'am" or "no ma'am."

Devante received one office referral in sixth grade for being "disruptive during student presentations," and he received three office referrals in the seventh grade. His language arts teacher wrote, "After another student was sent out of the room for disrupting the class by singing, Devante began singing." On another occasion, his math teacher gave Devante an office referral for use of inappropriate language. The teacher had asked students what they do to get out of a bad mood, and Devante replied, "Watch porn."

At the time of the interview in November of his eighth grade year, Devante was 13 years old. He had a grade point average of 1.8 and had received unsatisfactory behavior marks in four out of seven classes. He was enrolled in an honors language arts class and had scored proficient on the California Standardized Test (CST) in English language arts and mathematics in 2012-2013, which is the last year the CST was given.

He was not happy about the low grades he had at the time and said that he recently had a "wake up call" when his grandma said to him, "You're slacking. You need to get back on track and be the kid you was in elementary" (Interview One). When asked how he got off track, Devante explained:

> I keep telling myself, "How did that happen?" I have no idea. Middle school must have changed me, but I'm trying to get back on track. I don't know. I have no idea. No idea.

I tried to become the person I was but it didn't—I'm going to tell myself when I went home—like, "What's wrong? Get better. Get better. Get better." And then in class one thing happened to the next and I start talking, doing all of that. And then—I don't know. I honestly don't. It's complicated. (Interview One)

A few minutes later, I asked Devante what he thought about his behavior in school, and he gave this answer:

I'll just say my behavior, on a scale from one to ten, is a six. I want to do good, but I've always been known as the class clown. People tell me, "You're funny. You're funny," and I guess I'm trying to keep up that ego. I don't want to—I want to be like—I want to get my grades up, but it's not letting me. The ego is telling me go along with the flow, "Don't do this. Talk this." But I'm telling you, ever since my grandma told me—like she broke it down—it changed me. And now that I know that, this is my life, and I need to change it around. (Interview One)

When asked to define the term defiance during the first interview, Devante said, "When I use the word defiance I mean talking back, being rude. Like you say this, and I do the other thing. I would say that's defiance."

Devante was very charming. One morning in June during his seventh grade year, Devante was given an office referral. While he was waiting to speak to me, the principal had asked him to count out scrolls that would be used in the upcoming eighth grade graduation ceremony. When he was done counting, Devante walked into principal's office and reported on the number of scrolls. Then he looked at me and said, "I guess we gotta talk now."

We walked into my office, and I read the referral the teacher had written, "Refused to quiet down during announcements. Asked him to move his seat. He shouted, 'I'm not sitting there.' I said to go outside. Tried to have a conversation with him outside—he walked off."

Devante explained that he and two other boys had been talking and the teacher had moved them. A few minutes later, a girl teased him about his beanie, and he told her to shut up. Then the teacher told Devante to move to another seat, but he felt like it was the girl's fault, and she should be the one to move. I said very little before Devante admitted that it was not that big of a deal, and he should have moved when the teacher asked him to.

During his first interview, Devante remarked that teachers' expectations are not always clear. He had received an office referral in the seventh grade for leaving his seat to get a paper towel. He felt that this was unfair for two reasons. One, the teacher allowed students to get up to get a drink of water, and two, the teacher was talking to the principal at the time. Devante did not want to interrupt their conversation to ask for permission to get the paper towel. He stated,

> He [the teacher] was talking to her [the principal], so I just got up out of my seat to get a paper towel. I didn't know that was a big deal, but he said I didn't follow the rules. And you were talking to her, so why can't I just go out of my seat and get it? I know kids get out of their seats and drink water. There's not a big difference between water and a paper towel. You just like—why do it to me? I don't get it. I didn't get it. I guess he was probably mad or something happened or—I don't know, but that was the situation.

Devante was planning to go to college and wanted to play professional football, but he knew that there was a "high capability of me not making it to the NFL," so becoming an engineer was his backup plan.

When he had gotten into trouble at school, Devante was punished at home, too. He was not allowed to watch television or play games, and sometimes he got a "whoopin" if it was something "serious." He was in the fifth grade the last time he got a "whoopin". He did not want to discuss what he did to "deserve" the punishment, but Devante had this to say about it:

> One time, my dad—he wanted to—he didn't want to whoop me. He had to call my grandma, and be like, "I don't want to whoop him, but I know that if I don't he's going to do it again." So I just told my dad to whoop me. I was like, "I deserve it." (Interview One)

Jamal. Jamal was tall with a muscular build and dark skin. He could often be seen brushing his hair, which was always styled in a neatly trimmed hairstyle referred to as a fade. He usually wore a large "diamond" earring in each ear, and most days he wore cargo pants, a t-shirt, and basketball shoes. He was 14 years old at the time of the interview.

I first met Jamal when he transferred to the HSD when he was in the third grade. He had some reading deficiencies when he enrolled, and I worked with him in my role as literacy coach. I remember Jamal as being shy but eager to learn. I became reacquainted with Jamal when I moved to MMS as the assistant principal, and Jamal was in the seventh grade.

Jamal had received 26 office referrals during his three years at MMS, which is the most of any of the participants. He received the majority of the office referrals, 17, during his seventh grade year, and he received three office referrals in the sixth grade and six in the eighth grade. Examples of these office referrals include not working, telling a student in his group to "shut the fuck up," and being off task and talking. Three office referrals resulted in in-school suspensions

in the seventh grade. Each of those suspensions was for truancy. Jamal either cut class or did not report to the office when he was directed to do so by the teacher.

Jamal's behavior improved in the eighth grade. He was suspended once for fighting with a student before school, and he received office referrals for actions such as "slouching," and using his ear buds during class and refusing to give them to the teacher when directed to do so. Because of his class behavior and low grades, Jamal needed to write an appeal in order to participate in the eighth grade graduation ceremony. About a week before the ceremony, the principal began approving appeals and calling students into her office to let them know if they would be participating the graduation ceremony or not. She had been calling in a few students every day, and those who had not been called in yet were becoming increasingly anxious to know their fate. She called the PE teacher on the radio and asked him to send Jamal to the office. Jamal had many tardies to class, and the principal had spoken to him about this in the past. After her original call to the PE teacher, the principal added, "Tell Jamal that he's got one minute to get here, or he can forget about it." I looked out of the office window and saw Jamal sprinting across the yard. Once in the office, he returned to his laid-back nature.

His appeal was approved, and he was allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony. I was calling student names during the ceremony, and as he approached the front of the line, I could hear Jamal saying to himself, "Say my name. Say my name" as he beamed with pride.

At the time of his interview, Jamal had a grade point average of 1.6 and had received unsatisfactory behavior marks in three out of seven classes.

When asked about his behavior in school, Jamal said that sometimes he is good, and sometimes he is bad. "It's just like I be having a good day, I be in the classroom paying attention.

And sometimes I have bad days, and I just be like, head down, don't want to do nothing" (Interview One).

Jamal felt very strongly that not enough teachers listened to their students. In recounting the incidents in which he had received an office referral, he often felt that the situation could have been resolved in class if the teacher had taken a minute to listen to him. He described a good teacher as one who "listens to the student, respects the student as they would like to be respected, and do fun things in class" (Interview Two).

When asked what one thing he would change at MMS if he could, Jamal answered without any hesitation, "Some of the teachers, like stop getting an attitude so quick, and just listen" (Interview One). One day Jamal was having a bad day due to "personal stuff" and felt like his science teacher made the situation worse. Jamal explained:

> 'Cuz I be mad sometimes, and the teacher don't make it no better and I get real madder at the teachers and I just really don't care. Like I walked into class and I'm fixin' to be on time and they [other students] be playin' around at the door, "oh and let me tie my shoe real quick" and he [the teacher] come outside yelling—I just got mad. He [the teacher] coulda said [to me], "Okay. Go in the classroom," and talk to them about why they was playing at the door instead of sending all of us. (Interview One)

When teachers yelled, Jamal would become angry and not want to do anything in their classes. When teachers listened to him, he was able to sit down and do his work. He also thought that some teachers believe that they can do anything because they are the teacher.

Because of his high number of office referrals, many adults on campus assumed that Jamal did not want to be in a classroom, that he was intentionally misbehaving so that he would

be removed from the class. Several times during his two interviews, Jamal expressed that he wanted to stay in class. He thought teachers sent him out for small things like having his head down on his desk. He would become angry when he was sent to another classroom on a time-out because that made him feel "like a baby, like a kid" (Interview Two).

Jamal believed that some teachers are quick to judge and do not always understand him, "Like we'll be talking, but it will be something similar to what we're reading or something and they don't listen and they'll just yell. And then we try to tell them we're talking about the story, just they don't care" (Interview Two).

Jason. Jason was 14 years old at the time of the study and was about 5'6" with a slender build. He wore jeans and a t-shirt on most days and almost always had a hat on, either a baseball cap or a bucket hat with palm trees on it. Jason shook my hand at least once a day. He would look me in the eyes, say "Hello," and shake my hand in the traditional way. He always seemed to have a sly look for his friends at the same time. I know that Jason was putting on a bit of an act for me, but it seemed to be out of respect, and I enjoyed it. At one point, before I even told him about my study, he began calling me Dr. Ray because one of his teachers told him that I was enrolled in a doctorate program.

Jason attended school in LAUSD prior to enrolling in HSD's MMS in the sixth grade. Jason received one office referral in the sixth grade for not paying attention and talking, and one in the seventh grade for continuing to play fight during lunch after being directed to stop. In the eighth grade, Jason received three office referrals, and two were from his math teacher: "Jason is interrupting the class with constant conversation and his cursing," and "Jason came late to class

and would not sit down after multiple requests. He demanded a paper towel and disrupted the testing environment."

At the time of the paper towel referral, Jason had math class right after lunch, and he had been playing basketball and wanted a paper towel to wipe the sweat off of his face. When Jason was sent to the office, the sweat on his face was so pronounced and obvious that I sent him to the restroom to clean his face before I even looked at the referral or spoke to him. During the interview a few weeks later Jason explained, "I think she [the teacher] said to be quiet and to act like a normal kid, and I said I am being a normal kid and she said go to the office." Jason didn't understand what he had done wrong and wondered, "Why would she give me a referral for having a sweaty face and not being able to get a paper towel?" (Interview One).

Jason also told me that those teacher's comments made him feel bad because he knew that he was a normal kid. At the time of the interviews, Jason had a grade point average of 2.0 and had received unsatisfactory behavior marks in three out of seven classes.

Jason did not know how teachers define defiance. When asked if it was a problem that students do not know what a teacher thinks is defiant, Jason replied, "No 'cuz that's the teacher's thing" (Interview One). He went on to say, "If you've been here for a while then you'll figure out what she like and doesn't like or what he like or doesn't like" (Interview One). Jason added that it usually takes "some weeks" to learn what a teacher likes.

Jason stated that he does not ever intend to be defiant, but sometimes if his friends are in his class "we joke around and stuff" and that has gotten him in some trouble. Jason explained that he was working with his group on an art project in his language arts class when he got in trouble because the teacher said "I had the paintbrush to my head and it looked like I wasn't

working." The teacher took the paint away and gave the group spelling worksheets to do instead. Jason got in more trouble when he refused to do the spelling assignment because he thought it was unfair:

> It was like she was only focusing on our group. She was constantly looking at our group, and I was holding the paintbrush to my head. I was working, but she thought I was laughing. She said our work wasn't getting done quick enough or as quick as she want it to be, but we was still getting work done. (Interview One)

His homeroom teacher had sent Jason out of class several times during the first trimester of eighth grade, and Jason remembered:

> I was doing something. I think I was talking, and he [the teacher] told me to stop. Then he said "I'm gonna call your dad," and then he called him. After I was done talking to him [my dad] the teacher gave me another worksheet, and I balled it up and I threw it away. And he said, "Can you pick it up?" and I picked it up. (Interview One)

Jason admitted to repeating this sort of behavior a few more times, but eventually, "it got old." He was able to remain in this class and complete his work.

Jason defined a good teacher as someone who will "help you when you ask for help, call your parents to see how you're doing, and check on you from time to time" (Interview Two).

Keon. Keon was of average height and had a slight build. He almost always wore jeans and a sweatshirt. Keon had a serious disposition, was quiet, and often kept to himself, except for when he was playing basketball before school or during lunch. He was 14 years old at the time of the interview.

Keon attended school in LAUSD prior to enrolling in the HSD in the third grade. He received one office referral in sixth grade and two in seventh grade. He did not receive any office referrals while in the eighth grade. His office referrals were for spitting from the second floor, throwing objects in class, and being involved in horseplay during the passing period.

At the time of the interviews, Keon had a grade point average of 1.8 and had not received any unsatisfactory behavior marks in any of his seven classes.

Keon defined defiance as not listening and recognized that teachers have different methods of dealing with defiant behavior in the classroom. Keon offered, "Like being defiant in one classroom, you'll get a referral, and then in the other classroom they'll call your house" (Interview One). Calling home was a more effective consequence for him. Keon did not like to disappoint his parents, and his parents punished him at home by grounding him and taking away privileges such as watching television and using his cell phone.

Keon liked going to school, and math and PE were his favorite classes. Keon described his PE teacher as being respectful and fair, and Keon's perception was that this teacher did not treat the students like "little kids" (Interview One). Keon stated that even though he did not always follow directions, he did not have any problems in his classes. Sometimes, a teacher might need to give him a reminder about staying focused on his work. "They'll be like, 'Oh, Keon, do this, do that' and then I'll do it" (Interview One).

He remarked that other students might have a more difficult time behaving in class because "some days they don't want to be here. They don't like being in school" (Interview One).

Mathias. Mathias was short and stocky with dark skin. He liked to joke around and had an infectious laugh. He heard about the focus group from his friend Da'wan and approached me in the quad during passing period one morning and said, "I want to tell my story."

Mathias lived with his mom and stepdad, who he considered to be his "real dad." His biological father was in prison, and Mathias had not seen him since he was "little." He was 13 years old at the time of the study.

Mathias had been in the district since first grade, and he had received only one office referral while at MMS. During the focus group, he disclosed that he had been given many classroom timeouts, and teachers have called home because of his defiant behavior. At the time of the focus group, Mathias had a grade point average of 2.0 and had received unsatisfactory behavior marks in four out of seven classes. Mathias admitted that he talks a lot in class, which is something he has done since the first grade: "I like to make kids laugh, but I get my work done."

Mathias stated that most teachers think that he is immature, but it "doesn't matter because it's how I am." However, he admitted that he is more comfortable in his language arts class because he can be himself, and the teacher laughs at his jokes when his timing is appropriate. On the other hand, he finds his science class "boring, dull, quiet, and cold." He admitted to talking a lot in that class, and as a result, he sits in the corner away from other students. Mathias said that other students still find ways to start conversations with him. One day another student was sent out of his science class, and when Mathias told him, "That's better than being here," the teacher sent him out, too.

During the focus group, Mathias joked about getting sent out of class, but he also admitted to being angry about it. When he was sent out of science class, he did not know what the assignment was. Mathias added, "It turns out I did the wrong thing, and I was mad. I finished it and everything, but I did the wrong thing." He also admitted to crying in class when his math teacher called home because of his misbehavior in class. He begged the teacher not to call home even though his friend was telling him to be quiet.

Mathias hoped to go to college so that he can be the first person in his family to do so. He did not know yet what he wanted to be, but he and his mom had discussed engineering as a possible field of study.

Michael. Michael was about 5'5" and overweight. He was 14 years old, and he typically wore jeans and a hooded sweatshirt regardless of the weather. He was soft-spoken and generally respectful. When he would become angry, Michael would become very quiet and refuse to talk. He was more sensitive than his physical size and demeanor would lead people to believe, and fairness was very important to him.

Michael had been in the District since kindergarten, and he received two office referrals in seventh grade and one in eighth grade. Two referrals were written for play-fighting in PE class, and the third referral was written for yelling and throwing an eraser in class. He had a grade point average of 2.3 and had received unsatisfactory behavior marks in two out of seven classes at the time of his interview.

Michael was the only one to criticize the way I had handled a disciplinary event. He did not think the rules were always applied fairly at school, and he explained:

> Because y'all always say if you ever get in a fight, both of the people will be suspended. But I remember the last time I got in a fight I was the only one suspended. And I think that wasn't fair 'cuz we both engaged, and I got suspended and he didn't. I thought that was unfair. (Interview One)

Michael expressed his concern that teachers have also been unfair and explained that he had been sent out of the room for sharpening his pencil. He recalled that he had permission to sharpen his pencil, but he thought that the teacher had forgotten that she had given him permission. He felt embarrassed and mad when the teacher sent him out of the room even though he had done nothing wrong. Michael stated:

> I was really mad 'cuz I didn't really do nothing. I asked to sharpen my pencil, but you know how if you're sitting at your desk and people are asking you questions? I rose my hand and she seen me, and she said yes. And I guess she had got mad at another student, and she told everybody to sit down. And I was sharpening my pencil, and she said, "Go sit down." And I was like, "You said I could sharpen my pencil." She told me to go outside to the pod. (Interview One)

When asked to describe his own behavior at school Michael said, "I think it's so-so, like, I can have a good day, and sometimes I can have a talkative day in a bad way." He went on to say that his behavior would probably be better if teachers would "help me out with my work and notice that I'm doing work" (Interview One).

Michael believed that he was a good kid, but could name only one teacher at MMS who shared that belief. He thought that he would do better in school if more teachers believed in him. Michael did not deny any of his misbehavior, but expressed anger for being reprimanded by his

teachers sometimes, “Because when I try to sit down and do something right, they don’t pay attention or notice me, but as soon as I do something wrong they be right on it.” If teachers noticed his positive qualities more often, he believed he would perform better in school “‘cuz I’ll be more proud of myself. I think I’ll be able to get straight As. And just to have teachers to have my back.” (Interview One)

When teachers do not believe in him, Michael said, “It feels bad … and it feel like how am I suppose to pass your class if you can’t even notice me or anything?” (Interview One).

Rashan. Rashan was serious and rather quiet when outside with other students. He was 14 years old, of average height and build, and had dark skin. He wore dark colored clothes, jeans and a sweatshirt that were at least one size too big for him. He wore his hair in a short Afro that was a bit unkempt. His mother passed away recently, and he and his sister (who was in the seventh grade at MMS) lived with their older brother and sister, grandmother, and aunt. He surprised me during the focus group interview. He was assertive and passionate about the topics we discussed. When I explained the study to the focus group, Rashan wanted to know if there was “scientific proof that African Americans get in more trouble?”

Rashan had been in the District since kindergarten, and he received one office referral in the sixth grade and two in the seventh grade. One office referral was written for play-fighting in the hallway. His music teacher wrote the other two office referrals because Rashan had become “argumentative” and “belligerent” when the teacher attempted to correct Rashan’s behavior. At the time of the focus group, he had a grade point average of 2.5 and had received one unsatisfactory behavior mark and one outstanding behavior mark in two out of seven classes.

When Rashan got in trouble at school he also got in trouble at home. His grandmother would talk to him about it, but his aunt would threaten him. "She just be like 'you better stop before I sock you,' and I be like 'oh, okay.'" He believed they react that way because they want him to do well in school and have a better life than they have had. He explained:

> Like most Black parents that I've seen lately, they don't graduate, they don't go to college, or they drop out in high school. So they just want me to go to college. They don't want me to be a bum in the street. They don't want me living in their house when I'm 50, and they're a hundred and something. And like so that's why they discipline me. They take my stuff away, and I get a whoopin' or something.

Fairness and respect were very important to Rashan, and in seventh grade he had two teachers who he thought were very unfair and disrespectful. Rashan felt that his science teacher in the seventh grade singled him out, and explained, "Someone else talks, and I'll talk back to someone, and he'll [the teacher] send ME out." Another time Rashan turned around to get something out of his backpack and got sent out of the room because the science teacher thought he was talking. Rashan was adamant that he had not been talking and said that another student even took responsibility for the talking, but the teacher did not care. Rashan says that eighth grade is better because "now I can turn around and get a pencil out of my backpack without getting sent out."

Rashan became upset when his music teacher called him by the wrong name and did not apologize for it. Rashan was given a time-out, but the teacher did not write an office referral for this incident. Rashan recounted:

> Last year in Mr. Murphy's class, he called my name wrong, and I told him my name is "Rashan." And he said, "I don't care what your name is," and I told him, "When I get your name wrong, I won't care if I get it wrong." And he sent me out, and I was like, "Okay. Bye. That's why I didn't want to be in your class anyway." And I left and I slammed the door 'cuz I was real mad. I wanted to slap him.

Rashan thought his behavior was "okay" because he had not been sent to the office or been suspended while in the eighth grade. He was trying to get good grades so he could enroll in the AVID[1] program in high school. Rashan stated that most teachers see him as "just another student," and he feels "at home" in only one class. That teacher routinely told Rashan that he has potential, and he felt like he could rely on her.

Sayon. Sayon was tall and had an athletic build. He was 13 years old, but his voice had changed already, and he was beginning to grow facial hair. Sayon lived with his mother and father. Sayon was the quarterback of the school's flag football team, played on the basketball team, and carried himself with confidence. He was voted "Super Athletic" by his peers in the eighth grade.

Sayon had been in the District since kindergarten. I first met him when he was in the first grade where I was the literacy coach at the elementary school he attended. I worked there until he was in third grade. We met again when I became the assistant principal at MMS during Sayon's sixth grade year. Sayon received three office referrals in the sixth grade, and his language arts teacher wrote two of those office referrals for not following directions and calling

[1] AVID is a program that helps to prepare students with B, C, or D grades for success in high school, college, and a career. The program focuses on helping students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education learn about and attend college.

other students names ("butter finger" and "fat"). His third referral that year was for not reporting to class. I remember that Sayon took responsibility for his actions right away. The two friends he was with made up excuses for being out of class while Sayon admitted that he knew he was supposed to be in class, and he made a bad decision when he chose to hang out with his friends in the hallway. He had not had a problem like this since.

In seventh grade, he received four office referrals. A long-term substitute teacher wrote two of those office referrals. One referral was for "not being in his seat, not working and refusing to go to time out," and the other one was for "talking and being argumentative when redirected."

Sayon was very thoughtful and reflective during the focus group, and he often asked other participants clarifying questions.

When the topic of consequences of office referrals came up, Sayon said, "I feel like, damn, it's about to go down!" He explained that if a teacher calls home, he will be in trouble and will have to sit in his room "forever." His family disciplines him with long talks, punishments, and "whoopins" because they "want us to improve ourselves. Like believe in ourselves." He also said that his parents "always tell me that I'm not too old to get whoopins. They want me to do stuff that they didn't get a chance to do."

Sayon wants to play football in high school, has applied to at least one private school and was considering schools outside of his home district. He believed that having referrals and suspensions on his record could lower his chances of getting into a high school.

Many of the participants complained of being singled out for punishment when they were not the only one breaking a rule at the time. Sayon shared this story from seventh grade during the focus group:

> I was talking. I wasn't the only one talking, and I guess she told me again. She [the teacher] said, "You gotta go to a different class," but I wasn't the only one talking so I got mad and started talking back. And she said something, and I said, "Whatever," and walked out because she told me to go to a different classroom. I wasn't the only one talking though.

At the time of the focus group, Sayon had a grade point average of 2.0 and received one unsatisfactory behavior mark and one outstanding behavior mark in two of his seven classes.

Tavion. Tavion was of average height and overweight. He was 13 years old, and he wore jeans and a hooded sweatshirt most days. Every once in a while, though, Tavion would wear a white dress shirt and a red bow tie with his jeans. He was relatively quiet, thoughtful and sensitive. He lived in a neighboring city and woke up at 4:30am every day to take the bus to school because he and his family believed that MMS was better than his neighborhood school. Tavion sings in his church choir and has invited me to his concerts.

Tavion had been in the District since first grade. He received one office referral in the sixth grade for refusing to follow directions. Tavion received two office referrals from a long-term substitute teacher in the seventh grade. Both times the teacher stated that she had attempted to redirect Tavion, and he responded negatively. One time he responded, "I ain't got shit" and the next time he called the teacher "retarded." Tavion received two office referrals in the eighth grade. One was from his science teacher for being tardy and disruptive, and the other from his

music teacher who wrote, “Tavion continually gets out of his seat and walks around the classroom being disruptive. I told him to sit down. He said, ‘No!’ When I said I would write a referral, Tavion said, ‘I don't give a fuck.’”

Tavion’s explanation of this office referral was as follows:

> Well, I just—I just walked in and he [the teacher] was saying negative stuff. And then I was already in a bad mood, so when he said that it like just made me madder, and I walked out because I was going to calm down outside. But then he said, “Sit down,” and I said, “No,” and he said, “Then go to the office,” and I cursed. (Interview One)

He explained that he was in a bad mood because he had overslept that morning and had almost missed his bus. He could not remember what exactly the teacher had said; only that it was negative and that the teacher was “kinda loud.” Even though he was in a bad mood all morning, Tavion did not have any problems in his first three classes that day. He explained that he just stayed quiet in those classes, but when “Mr. Murphy said something negative, like, oh, since I was already in a bad mood it just got bigger. And I exploded” (Interview One).

Tavion told his parents about this incident with Mr. Murphy. He said that his dad understood why Tavion reacted the way he did, but his mom was mad. Tavion explained:

> She said it reflects on her, what I do. So they think that—she think that the teachers think that’s coming from my parents. So she told me to be on my best behavior at all times. So she was mad because I wasn’t [on my best behavior]. (Interview One)

Tavion lived with his mother and father, an older sister and a younger brother. His sister was a senior in high school and was planning to attend Loyola Marymount University (LMU) to study film. Tavion had thought a little bit about college and would like to go to the University of

Oregon or LMU. Education was important to Tavion because "you need it to succeed in life, because without it, it's going to be hard to get a better job and a good job" (Interview Two).

Tavion did not feel like any of his teachers at MMS knew him or cared about him. He had to go back to elementary school to name an adult who cared about him. He said that the counselor at his elementary school saw that he was getting in trouble and worked with him. They played games, and she rewarded him when his classroom behavior had improved.

Even though he felt that his teachers did not care about him, he still wanted to do well in their classes because he wanted to graduate. He did his best to ignore the negative comments or rude tones of some of his teachers. He said he wished that more teachers would take the time to ask students more questions and try to understand them better. Tavion said:

> I wish teachers would probably try to understand the students better, but I know that's hard because they have a lot of students. Or I wish that they would like ask the students to probably just stay in a couple—like two minutes and ask them why—if they was being bad, ask them why, like is something going on, instead of just assuming that they was just doing that just to be a class clown and send them to the office. (Interview Two)

I interviewed Tavion in November and December of his eighth grade year, and at that time he had a grade point average of 2.4 and had received an unsatisfactory behavior mark in one out of seven classes. Tavion described his behavior as "good," but "I think probably in elementary it was bad." When asked what brought about the change Tavion answered, "Because I am maturing, and I learned from my mistakes"(Interview One).

During the two interviews, Tavion was soft spoken, but he gave very thoughtful and often detailed answers to my questions. However, he said very little during the focus group, but he felt

affirmed by what the other boys were saying. Rashan told a story of Mr. Murphy calling him by the wrong name and said, "I think if you want me to be respectful to you, you gotta be respectful to me too."

Tavion replied, "Amen! That's what my mom say," and several of the boys clapped.

Vance. Vance was of average weight and height. He was 13 years old, and he had light skin, green eyes, and light brown hair styled in a short Afro. He dressed primarily in cargo pants or shorts and t-shirts, but occasionally he would wear a sweater and look a bit "preppy." He liked to play basketball after school, but not at lunch because he did not like to play in his school clothes. He was voted "Most Humorous" by his peers in the eighth grade.

Vance attended school in LAUSD before enrolling in HDS's MMS in the sixth grade. He had received a total of 21 office referrals, 13 in the sixth grade, five in the seventh grade, and three in the eighth grade. In the sixth grade, Vance received office referrals from each of his teachers for behaviors such as refusing to work, chewing gum and arguing with the teacher about it, leaving the room without permission, and disrupting class. One office referral from his PE teacher resulted in a one-day in-school suspension. The PE teacher reported that Vance was "cheating on the mile run." The teacher then directed Vance to go to a time-out class, and Vance replied, "Whatever. You're a bitch ass nigga."

Vance received fewer office referrals in the seventh grade. He was sent to the office for "running around the classroom, throwing tissues at a student, and disrupting the class by shouting out comments." In the first trimester of eighth grade, Vance received three office referrals from his math teacher. In all three incidents, Vance walked away from his teacher when the teacher attempted to redirect his behavior. Vance came directly to the office on each

occasion. He also walked out of his language arts class once. That teacher did not write a referral, but I held a conference with Vance's father at that time.

When I asked Vance about why he left the classroom without permission on these occasions, he said he did so because he was mad "'cuz I feel like I shouldn't be getting in trouble. I feel like, I just don't feel like I'm being treated right that's why I get mad" (Interview One). He described the most recent incident in his language arts class which occurred during a district assessment:

> Somebody said something. I started laughing, and I guess I was the loudest that's why she [the teacher] said something about giving me a U. And I was like—I got mad. The teacher was just choosing me 'cuz everybody else was laughing, and she choose me out of everyone else 'cuz there was too much going on. (Interview One)

Vance's parents were upset when they found out that he had been leaving class and told him, "It doesn't matter, they're adults. You have to listen to them. You can't just walk out" (Interview Two). Vance had time to reflect on this kind of behavior before the interview and told me, "I be bad sometime. I make stupid choices. Like the time when I kept leaving the class. It woulda been a class thing. I woulda just got in trouble in class instead of going to the office" (Interview One).

Vance's mother worked at the airport, and according to Vance, "a lot of people will be disrespecting her." She has told Vance that she does not let people get to her because "if she got mad she could end up losing her job. So she just tells me, 'Don't do all the extra' you know" (Interview Two).

I asked him if there had been times recently where he wanted to walk out of class but did not, and what did he do instead? He answered:

> Just took it, just like—I thought about graduation. I just kept thinking about graduation. Mr. B, he talked to me about something, I don't really remember. I remember I just looked down, and I was listening to him, and I kept thinking about graduation, and it was over, and I thought, "That's not bad" (Interview Two).

Vance liked his language arts class the best because "everything is not so strict all the time. Like she has parts where it need to be strict, and she got times where we can be loose." He also likes that they get to work in groups a lot, "I don't like working by myself ALL the time. It gets boring." Working in a group also helps him gain insight into the material they are studying: "It seem like I get more ideas, stuff I never would have thought of" (Interview One).

At the time of the interview, Vance had a grade point average of 3.0 and had received two unsatisfactory behavior marks and one outstanding behavior mark. He had many questions about high school and college. When I asked him what high school he was planning on attending, he wanted to know how important that decision was. He said, "'Cuz I want to go to college. Do they look at the high school and say, 'Oh, he went to *that* high school?'" When we discussed different course options in high school including Advanced Placement courses, Vance asked, "Can I get so many credits that I can skip freshman year in college?" (Interview Two).

Themes Emerging in the Data

The fieldwork for this dissertation began in June of 2014 and concluded in February of 2015. During this seven-month period, I conducted interviews and one focus group with 11 eighth grade African-American boys at Meadows Middle School (MMS). As the assistant

principal of the school, I had developed a trusting relationship with each participant prior to data collection, I observed interactions between staff and students, and I reflected on my own interactions with students. I also analyzed office referrals and other documents related to discipline policies from the school and the district. As an administrator at the research site for two years, I also had a deep understanding of the school culture and the disciplinary procedures and practices, both official and unofficial. By using a multi-step inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002), I was able to find themes as they emerged from the participants.

Seven key themes emerged from this fieldwork. These themes informed the findings of this dissertation, and they were developed through a rigorous inductive analysis that began with coding and the discovery of patterns, domains, and themes verified by the various data collected over a seven-month time period. These seven themes tell the story of the students' experiences and perceptions of the disciplinary process at this public middle school. The emergent themes were:

1. Students defined defiance, but they said the definition varied by the teacher;
2. Students were punished at home when they are referred to the office or suspended;
3. Students understood that disciplinary actions affected them academically;
4. Students believed that most office referrals were unfair;
5. Students told teachers that their personal issues mattered;
6. Students were concerned about the impact of referrals on their futures; and
7. Students provided recommendations for teachers.

Theme 1: Students Define Defiance, but They Say the Definition Varies by the Teacher

When talking about defiance in the classroom, the terms or phrases used most often by participants were: rudeness, disrespect, bad language, talking back, not following rules, and not doing your work. When I asked each participant his definition of the term defiance, only Tavion said that he did not know the meaning. The remaining participants gave the following answers:

Jamal: Not listening while they're [the teacher] talking. Talking while they're teaching, and playing around while they try to talk to the class. (Interview One)

Keon: Not listening. (Interview One)

Michael: Disrespectful and talking back. (Interview One)

Jason: Going against – not respecting the authority. (Interview One)

Sayon: Somebody that resist to do something. (Focus Group)

Da'wan: When you don't follow the directions. Not doing your work. Disrespectful. (Interview One)

Mathias: I think defiance is being hard headed. (Focus Group)

Rashan: I think defiance is doing the opposite of what somebody told you to do. (Focus Group)

Devante: When I use the word defiance I mean talking back, being rude. Like you say this and I do the other thing, then I would say that's defiance. (Interview One)

Vance: Like not listening? (Interview One)

Most students believed that teachers would define the term in the same way they did, but Jason did not know how teachers define the term. Da'wan said that teachers "want to have control over everybody" (Focus Group). Rashan thought that a teacher would say, "If you don't do what I say, then that's basically defiance" (Focus Group).

When participants described the circumstances related to office referrals for defiance that they had received recently, talking was the most common reason for receiving a time out or an office referral. Da'wan, Rashan, Devante, Vance, and Sayon all described situations in which multiple people in the class were talking, but the teacher singled each of them out. Da'wan said, "Because in class everybody was talking and laughing, and she only sent me out, and the whole class was doing it." Devante was quite passionate about this topic during the focus group:

> That's what I don't understand. How am I bothering another student if they can just ignore me? So like I'm talking to Da'wan, like I'm talking, he doesn't HAVE to talk to me. I'm not bothering him. I'm not bothering him. He could do his work. They CHOOSE to talk to me too. So it's not really like I'm getting on his nerves. The teacher sees that we're both talking so why do I get the referral?

Da'wan agreed with Devante and said, "If you talk to me I could say 'I'm trying to do my work, don't talk to me right now,' or I could say, 'What do you want to talk about?'"

Jason became angry when a teacher did not think he was doing his work because he was talking, "'Cuz I'm talking [about the work], I'm doing what you asked me to do, and she still get upset for no reason" (Interview Two).

Participants did not see a problem with talking in class if they were talking about their work, were not bothering anyone, or if they were finished with their work. Devante said, "I think you should be able to talk if the teacher's not talking, but if the teacher's talking, that's disrespectful so you should be able to talk when they're not talking" (Focus Group).

Da'wan was sent out of his homeroom class in the eighth grade for talking, "I was talking too much. Like I did my work. It was just, I was just talking" (Interview One). He felt bad

because he had missed work, and wished that the teacher had talked to him about his behavior or called home instead of sending him out of the classroom.

Sayon described a situation that happened in his eighth grade language arts class that he thought was unfair:

> I'm not the only one talking. Again. I'm doing my work. She [the teacher] told me to move, but other people was talking around me, and I'm doing my work. She told me to move. She told me to go outside, but I don't move because I'm doing my work. Today she said, "Go over there cause you're talking." I finished all my work. I have a reason to talk.

Other behaviors, seemingly trivial matters to the participants, also sometimes resulted in office referrals. Jamal had received office referrals for slouching and having his earbuds out, and Tavion was surprised when a classmate was sent to the office when she arrived a few minutes late to class, "This one time a girl came in late. I think it was this year. A girl came in late, and then the teacher just sent the girl to the office. As soon as she came in" (Interview Two).

Theme 2: Students are Punished at Home When They are Referred to the Office or Suspended

Each participant expressed concern and worry about his family's reaction to a negative phone call home from the school. Consequences at home ranged from long talks, being grounded, having electronics and other privileges taken away, to "getting a whoopin'." Disappointing their parents, grandmothers, or aunts was by far the worst consequence.

When asked about consequences for receiving an office referral during the focus group, Rashan quickly said, "Nothing at school, it's when you go home. That's the real problem."

Mathias agreed and said, "That's the worst problem right there." Mathias admitted to crying in class when the teacher called home about his behavior. Keon and Da'wan both stated that it was more effective for a teacher to call home than it was to write an office referral.

When the subject of consequences at home was discussed in the focus group, the boys had the following conversation:

Devante: I know. I feel like I disappointed my parents. Like my grandma. I feel bad.

Sayon: When I get in trouble, my mom—she tell my dad, then my dad tell my grandma. I'm sitting in the room in front of all of them. I'm scared.

Devante: YEAH! You don't know what to do. They're all there.

Rashan: They're glaring at you like …

Sayon: My grandma do the questioning and my dad do the hitting and my mom, she just the instigator.

Mathias: My mom—she don't know when to stop. My dad has to pull her off me when I get in trouble.

When asked why family members responded this way when they got in trouble at school, the boys agreed that it was for their own good, but Devante admitted that he hates it "when they over-exaggerate the situation." Da'wan agreed and said, "I know, but sometimes they just go too extra about it. They could just talk to you—don't do this, don't do that, do this, and then let you go." Other participants said that their parents also get "extra" with them, but they do so because "They want us to improve ourselves. Like believe in ourselves," according to Sayon, who went on to say:

My grandma—she give me everything I want and need and everything. She just want me to do the right thing. That's the only reason why she exaggerates, but my dad—he tell

me the same thing over and over and over. I get tired of hearing it, but I know it's the right thing so I can't really say nothing.

Vance reported getting grounded at home as a result of getting in trouble at school, and his mom talks to him:

> My mom told me I'm not suppose to argue with adults. Doesn't matter what the situation is, they're adults. Like to respect your elders and stuff like that. A lot of time she always say I make her look bad, like I ain't got no home training. Another thing she say is, "you KNOW better!" (Interview One)

While all of the participants worried about consequences at home and said that they would improve their behavior in order to avoid further punishment, several of the boys mentioned that calling home for other students would not be effective. Da'wan said, "There's nothing you can do because it's the kids. If you call home saying they've been bad, the next day they come back and do the same thing" (Interview One).

Theme 3: Students Understand that Disciplinary Actions Affect Them Academically

During the individual interviews and the focus group, participants mentioned the standard consequences given for office referrals at MMS: time-out of the referring teacher's class for the remainder of the period, conference with an administrator or dean of students, lunch detention, community service, calls home, and suspension.

Three students also mentioned receiving lower grades when discussing consequences for defiance. Jamal stated that some teachers would ignore defiant behavior and, "they'll just not say nothing to you, but they'll give you a F." Jamal, however, said he thought that it is better when the teacher "tells you to sit up and do your work" (Interview One).

Vance has seen his math teacher "push and push" students to do their work, but "if you just don't do it, your grade will be bad, and he [the teacher] don't care. It's your fault" (Interview Two). He believes that this form of "punishment" is better than writing an office referral for a student who is not working.

Da'wan reported, "If I get sent out I miss assignments, and that's a lower grade" (Interview One). Sayon said that instead of writing a referral for talking in class, that behavior should be, and often is, reflected in the behavior grade on the student's report card.

Several students discussed missing out on work or having to complete "boring" work when they got sent out of the classroom. Four classrooms are clustered around a small lobby area commonly referred to as the pod. Teachers often use pod as a time-out area. Students report that sometimes a teacher will yell, "Go to the pod!" when a student is disruptive or misbehaves in some small way. Da'wan shared his frustration and added, "They [teachers] just say, 'Go to the pod!' If I ask if there is something I can do, they say, 'No! Go to the pod!'" (Focus Group).

After leaving class several times this year when he did not like what the teacher was saying to him, Vance realized that he was falling behind academically. He said, "Oh, I missed the day. That's the other thing with math. If you miss three minutes, you missed a whole lot!" He also realized that if he was getting in as much trouble now as he had in the sixth grade, there would be "no way to keep up, especially with math 'cuz they're always on the move" (Interview One).

Sayon and Mathias also mentioned not being able to attend a class field trip as a consequence for getting in trouble at school. Sayon explained:

> I was accused of something I didn't do, but I did say something bad. I was supposed to go [on the field trip], but that person went and got me in trouble. But that person did something too. So she got to go on the field trip, and I didn't. That was messed up. I didn't like that.

Mathias was not able to attend the end of the year picnic in fifth grade because "this boy told me to sock him in the stomach. And I did, and then he started crying and told the supervisor that I socked him in the stomach for no reason."

In both the interviews and the focus group, participants reported feeling angry, sad, embarrassed, and worried when they were sent out of the room for a time-out or when they received an office referral.

Sayon expressed worry about his future, and said, "I'm scared of getting kicked out of the district 'cuz I don't know what school I'm going to next," and, "When you go to high school they look at all that stuff, so it reflects back on you."

In multiple ways, each participant expressed the desire to do well in school, both academically and in terms of behavior. Each one also identified himself as a "good kid" who wants to make his family proud. Their feelings of anger and sadness on occasions when they had been in trouble at school were closely tied to the reactions of their families.

Theme 4: Students Believe that Most Office Referrals are Unfair

All of the participants believed that most of the office referrals are given unfairly due to one of the following reasons: 1) teachers sometimes make assumptions about students' behavior, 2) teachers can make a situation worse by "saying negative stuff" or yelling, and 3) teachers' expectations can be unclear and lead to misunderstandings.

Teachers' assumptions. Tavion thought a classmate received an office referral unfairly when he had his backpack on his lap and was looking for a pencil:

> I think he was looking for a pencil in his backpack, but he had his backpack like this [on his lap] and digging through it. But the teacher couldn't see his hands. And then he was looking for a pencil, and then the teacher thought he was on his phone [texting], but he wasn't. His phone was in his pocket, and he got a referral. (Interview Two)

Several students believed that teachers became upset because they thought students were distracted and not completing their work just because they were talking. Da'wan explained, "When we talk to our neighbor they tell us to be quiet, but they don't know we're talking about the work. They think we're just talking. Let kids talk, but see what they're talking about first" (Interview Two).

Michael's teacher told him he was being disrespectful when he was trying to sharpen his pencil. He honestly did not think he had done anything wrong, and it certainly was not his intent to be disrespectful:

> I was like really mad 'cuz I didn't really do nothing. She [the teacher] saw me and said I was being disrespectful, but I really wasn't. I'll get out of my seat to sharpen my pencil, and she'll ask, "What are you doing?" And I'll say, "I'm sharpening my pencil." And then she'll be like, "Go back to your seat," but I'm just trying to sharpen my pencil, and I'm not being disrespectful. I was just trying to sharpen my pencil. (Interview One)

Vance did not understand why he was punished when somebody else pushed him. He believes that his teacher probably thought that he was playing around:

> He [the teacher] was standing at the door letting us in, and a kid came from behind and pushed me, and he [the teacher] got mad at me! And I'm like I don't know who did it, none of that. He still getting mad at me. I don't see that. It's not like I pushed him [the other student] and took off running and let him push me. I don't know why he's trying to get mad at me for that. (Interview Two)

Yelling and saying "negative stuff." Many of the participants spoke about teachers who yell, or "get an attitude." They perceived some teachers as applying a double standard and believed that was unfair. Students reported getting in trouble for yelling or being disrespectful, but sometimes those same students felt provoked by teachers who yelled at them, called them names, or otherwise disrespected them.

Jason and Jamal both said that teachers could sometimes have "an attitude." Jason said that teachers show that by rolling their eyes, and Jamal felt that teachers who "just yell at me telling me to get out the classroom" (Interview One) do so because they are in a bad mood about something else and project their feelings onto him.

During the focus group, Rashan told us that he felt disrespected and angry when his music teacher had called him by the wrong name and then said, "I don't care what your name is." The following conversation took place:

Rashan:	I think if you want me to be respectful to you, you gotta be respectful to me too.
Tavion:	Amen. That's what my mom say. (Other students clapped)
Interviewer:	And do you think teachers are just picking on you, or does Mr. Murphy say things like that to all kids?
Sayon:	He does it to certain people.

Interviewer: What kind of people does he do that to?

Devante: Anybody. Everybody. The class I was in last year, he did it to everybody.

Interviewer: And is he joking?

Devante: I don't really know. But he did it to him [Mathias] the most though.

Interviewer: What did he do to you, Mathias?

Mathias: I don't know. He used to call me stupid and a pinhead.

Devante: He'd tell us to shut up.

Vance did not go into details, but he did admit to being disrespectful to a teacher because that teacher had made him mad. "It's all coming out of anger. I know a couple of times I kinda wanted to get the teacher mad 'cuz he got me mad" (Interview Two).

Fairness was extremely important to all participants. They were able to acknowledge when they had misbehaved and took responsibility for their wrongdoings. However, many became visibly upset when they described situations in which they believed a teacher treated them unfairly.

Teachers' expectations are unclear. Many rules change from classroom to classroom, which was often confusing to the students. They were permitted to eat in one room, but another teacher would throw their food away if they tried to eat it during class. Sayon drew cheers of "Yeah!" "Right!" and "Exactly!" when he said that some teachers "tell us not to eat in class, but they eat right in front of us." The participants felt especially frustrated when teachers did not follow their own rules.

Sometimes the expectations were not clear about what to do on an assignment. Rashan stated, "I don't like it when teachers tell you, just don't give you no directions, just sit there, but

then when you try to ask for help, they get mad at you." Devante stated that trying to understand what a teacher wants can be complicated:

> The teachers say, "Do this," but then again they'll say, "Do that." You wouldn't know what to do because they said the same thing twice. Well, they didn't say the same thing twice. They said different things at the same time so you didn't know which way to go so you do it your own way. (Interview One)

He added that he has been reprimanded for asking for clarification and also for doing an assignment his own way. He was resigned when he said, "That's just how it is." When asked what he usually did in that situation, Devante answered, "Shut up and go back to my seat." When asked how that made him feel, he answered, "Just, it's whatever, but you gotta not think about it" (Interview Two).

Theme 5: Students Tell Teachers that Their Personal Issues Matter

Participants expressed the desire to stay out of trouble and to get good grades. They wanted to make their families proud, and they realized that their behavior reflected on their families. Personal issues can range from the death of a family member to a bad hair day. Often, these adolescents did not even know why they were in a bad mood, yet they felt they were expected to behave in the same manner day after day while being given few opportunities to express themselves at school.

Sometimes students were just in a bad mood. Jamal said, "'Cuz I be mad some times, and the teacher don't make it no better, and I get real madder at the teachers and I just really don't care" (Interview One).

Several boys acknowledged that girls sometimes "have bad hair days" and think that the teacher should not assume that a student is simply being defiant because she does not want to remove her hood.

Participants were more comfortable talking about other students' struggles rather than their own. They recognized that some of the problems that their classmates face might affect their behavior. Tavion reflected on the possibility that some kids "act bad" because of "their family issues." When asked to explain this, Tavion said, "I used to have a friend like that. But it's because his dad and his mom, they're bad. Like his dad is in and out of jail, and his mom is crazy. It's just he got it from his parents" (Interview Two).

Mathias hypothesized that some students act out because "they think it's cool," or they "think it's funny to see the teacher get mad." He, however, reported that he listens to his mom who always tells him, "Don't think being smart is not cool."

Michael and Jamal asserted that they must show respect to their mothers, and they expressed that children who do not have to show respect to their own mothers do not always show respect to their teachers either. Michael said that some students' bad behavior is a reflection of their home life:

> To me, I don't think it's because of school. I just think it's because of home. Like some kids, like they don't have to show respect to their mom. I gotta show respect to my mom and stuff. And I think just because they don't do this stuff at home, I think they think, "Why should I do it at school?" It's like, some of my friends, I can see they don't show respect or do anything at home. (Interview One)

Jamal explained that whether one's behavior is good or bad, "You're just acting like your mom and them taught you." I asked Jamal if he ever misbehaved at school as a way to show off for his friends. He quickly answered, "No. It's just that I'm not in front of my mom" (Interview Two).

Personal issues ranged from arguments with a friend to having a parent in jail or prison. Like many teenagers, the participants were sometimes unable to pinpoint exactly what was bothering them on any given day, and participants were more comfortable discussing the tough issues that their friends were dealing with rather than their own personal issues. Participants also recognized that teachers sometimes make mistakes and have bad days. They also indicated that problems worsen in classrooms where teachers do not take the time to understand their issues or needs.

Theme 6: Students are Concerned about the Impact of Referrals on Their Future

Participants all expressed the desire to graduate from high school and go to college. They spoke only in very general terms about the importance of education:

Keon: We all need education (Interview One).

Da'wan: Because if you don't have an education you won't be able to have a job or have a house or live life (Interview Two).

Devante: You wouldn't be able to do what you want to do in life [without an education]. You could still do those, but it's going to be—it's easier to just get an education (Interview Two).

Tavion: You need it [an education] to succeed in life, because without it, it's going to be hard to get a better job and a good job (Interview One).

Jamal: If I wanna—do my little sport dream (knocks on table 2 times) I have to—learn (Interview Two).

Rashan: If they [students who do not get good grades] want to grow up to be a bum in the street, that's they fault (Focus Group).

Tavion said he wants to be a doctor, but he also reported disliking science classes and was unaware of the requirements or steps involved to pursue medicine. Tavion's sister was a senior in high school at the time of the study, and he said she intends to study film in college. Tavion said that he wants to attend college in Oregon or go to Loyola Marymount University (where his sister plans to attend).

Devante expressed interest in becoming a football player or an engineer, and Da'wan stated aspirations to play basketball or become an FBI agent because he likes computers and wants to travel. Jamal explained that he has his heart set on playing football in the NFL. All three boys said that they knew that high school and college were important in terms of being able to play and be seen by scouts for professional teams.

Sayon also said he wants to play football in high school and may not want to go to his home school. He was in the process of applying to a private high school and indicated awareness that having a disciplinary record with office referrals and suspensions can "lower your chance of getting into a high school that you want to go to. When you go to high school they look at all that stuff, so it reflects back on you."

At the time of data collection, Vance was uncertain about what he wants to do in the future and admitted that he does not "really know so many jobs." He expressed interest in becoming a veterinarian because he likes animals and because his aunt is a veterinarian. He then added:

> I was also thinking about being a real estate person 'cuz it seems sorta easy to be, like not do too much work. But then again I kinda want to go out and work. Do some work instead of just sitting there. (Interview Two)

Rashan was the only participant who stated a concrete career goal, other than sports, and a plan for achieving it. He said he wants to design computer games. He has already begun learning computer coding and plans to take computer science classes in high school.

Devante's thoughts on the future, which seemed somewhat uncertain, sum up the thoughts of the majority of participants:

> College—I would like to say that I'm going to college. Well, I know I'm going to college. I would like to say that I'll graduate from like a major—like a major school—but I don't know. I would like to say I'm going to try, but I don't know where life is going to take me. (Interview One)

Theme 7: Students Provide Recommendations for Teachers

Participants valued the idea of doing well in school. They felt proud about occasions when they had earned good grades and were recognized for good behavior. The subject of respect and fairness was raised in every interview and in the focus group. The boys gave several examples in which they described a teacher who was disrespectful towards them. They found it hypocritical and problematic when teachers abuse their power, do not abide by their own rules and are disrespectful to students.

The participants realized that they were responsible for their actions, but they had several reasonable recommendations for teachers. Participants felt strongly that if teachers followed these recommendations, they would be able to do better in school.

Listen more and yell less. Many students stated that some teachers yelled too much or that they said "negative stuff." This behavior by the teacher inevitably made the situation worse according to all students involved in the study. Rashan stated, "Teachers need to listen to the students. Like teachers think they know everything all the time." He continued, "Teachers always want to be right, but when we [students] do something right, they say it's wrong."

Da'wan stated that sometimes a teacher will "talk with attitude" and "if they're still mad at the student for what they did," (Interview One) the teacher might take it out on another student.

Jamal believed that some teachers think they can do anything, and he wished that teachers would "stop getting attitude and just listen." He gave this example of a teacher making the situation worse by yelling:

> Like if I came to class tardy, like I have a reason and they [teachers] just yell at me and be telling me to get out the classroom. Like just listen up to what I'm trying to say instead of yelling. I feel mad. I be trying to talk, and they yell. Oh my god! I just walk out the classroom. (Interview One)

Jamal said he feels unwelcome in classrooms where teachers yell a lot and only assign worksheets and silent reading. He expressed the belief that those teachers "probably just want kids to get out of their classroom." Jamal described a good teacher as someone who "listens to the student and respects the student as they would like to be respected." When teachers listen, Jamal can focus on his work. He said, "Instead of them yelling, and I get mad and I don't wanna do nothing in their class. They listen, okay. I sit down and I do my work" (Interview One).

Rashan explained that when a teacher is disrespectful to him, he is disrespectful to the teacher, "So she can know that I'm for reals. Like I'm trying to tell her that she's wrong."

Instead of being so quick to yell, the students wished teachers would just ask them about their behavior. Students have received referrals for being tardy to class, not working, or for wearing a hat or hood in class. Tavion believed that teachers should talk to students before sending them out of the room for not doing their work. Even when students are behaving "bad" they may have a good reason.

Make it fun. The majority of participants acknowledged that they behave better in classes that are "fun." Tavion agreed, but qualified the suggestion by saying that teachers should not make it "too fun because we could get carried away" (Interview Two).

Jamal admitted that he does not behave the same way in every class. He misbehaved in some classes because "sometimes it be like boring, and the other classes be like more better. I pay attention 'cuz I actually know what they're talking about" (Interview One). He wished he could do more projects and work in groups more often. Jamal learned "way more" during the recent unit on the Holocaust because the class went on a field trip, and they created paintings based on poems that they had read in class.

Vance enjoys his language arts class because they do a variety of activities and every day is different. Some days are spent writing, some days are spent reading, and on other days they work in their groups. Math class, on the other hand, is boring:

> We're by ourselves a lot. We have to be quiet 'cuz like it seems like we're always in a rush in math. That's why it's hard. And another thing we do the same thing basically every day—take notes, go over the problem, take notes, go over the problem. (Interview Two)

Students said they would like to do less silent reading, fewer worksheets, and do more engaging activities, such as working in groups, using food, creating their own math problems, writing raps, and going to the computer lab. Tavion said:

> Yeah, make it something better, like that we understand, but make it interesting. Play games or something, or do a group activity, but you're still learning, but a group activity. Say it's math class, and we're learning about variables and stuff. Have one group do a rap about it, then the other group make a problem about it in another group, stuff like that. (Interview Two)

Help me with my work. All participants wanted to work and succeed in school, and they wanted their teachers to help them. Rashan said, "I don't like it when teachers tell you, just don't give you no directions, just sit there, but then when you try to ask for help, they get mad at you."

Da'wan stated that nobody likes his math teacher because of the way she teaches: "She doesn't really teach. She just gives us the work and expects us to do it on our own" (Interview Two). He said that he has gotten in trouble for asking how to do an assignment.

Jamal admitted to having bad days and putting his head down on his desk, but he appreciates it when a teacher helps him by telling him to sit up and work. Not all teachers are the same in Jamal's experience:

> One classroom if you like not paying attention, they'll [teachers] just not say nothing to you but they'll give you a F. And in other classes, you not paying attention and have your head down, they'll like tell your head up and do work. (Interview One)

Sayon described another teacher who "doesn't really teach." He said, "She don't do nothing. She pass out the papers and don't explain no directions at all."

Vance said he appreciates when a teacher goes out of his or her way to help him and explain things so that he can understand. His description of a "bad" teacher was very similar to Sayon's:

> She doesn't really teach, just writes stuff on the board and tell you do it. Or she'll tell you how to do it with no examples. She just expect a lot from you and not give you, like not help you out a lot. (Interview Two)

Michael's language arts teacher showed that he cared about him by helping him bring up his grade. When Michael had a D in the class, his teacher helped him with the assignments and encouraged him to do extra work. Tavion believed that teachers needed to slow down and explain more:

> Probably explain what they're saying. In math, I have a hard time because some teachers, they go fast. I assume that the teacher thinks we all have the same pace. When one student say, "I'm done," the teacher assumes everybody else is done. That's what I assume. They will go to the next thing, but the other person won't be done, and then it's like that. Slow down and explain more, because sometimes they use big words that some people don't understand and other stuff that they assume that we learned this last year — or just learned it before. They think we know it. Explain it more. (Interview Two)

Notice the positives. Rashan believed that most of his teachers viewed him as "just another student," but he appreciated how his language arts teacher talks to him and tells him that

he has potential. As a result, he reported feeling "at home" in her class, having fun in her class, and being confident that he can rely on her.

Two of Vance's teachers started calling him by his nickname and "that's how I know that I'm kinda like closer to them than just a teacher" (Interview Two). These two teachers began calling him Van at some point during the year because they had noticed that his friends call him by that name. He reported that his math teacher gives students a lot of positive feedback in class, and Vance pays more attention in that class because of it. He explained, "Mr. B does it a lot. Like if you get a question right, he'll be like, 'You're on fire today!'" (Interview One).

Michael felt that too many teachers were quick to point out his shortcomings in the classroom, but failed to notice when he was doing his work. He said, "When I try to sit down and do something right, they don't pay attention or notice me, but as soon as I do something wrong, they be right on it." He went on to say, "Teachers always say they don't have favorites, but everybody have favorites. To me. That's how I think." (Interview One). Michael believed that teachers tend to ignore the bad behavior of their favorite students, and he would very much like to be somebody's favorite student.

Don't talk down to the kids. Many participants believed that teachers do not follow the same rules that students are expected to follow. Jamal stated, "They think that just because they're the teacher, they can do anything" (Interview One). Jason was adamant that teachers should not call kids names or talk down to kids, which he defined as "just basically putting your business out there." He then gave this example, "Say I wasn't graduating, and then they [teachers] say, 'That's why you're not graduating' in front of the whole class." He added, "That's just me and her business and nobody else's" (Interview Two).

Vance mentioned that he becomes frustrated when a teacher refuses listen to or take interest in his explanation. He recounted times when arguments with teachers became public, and he felt as though he had to defend himself:

> If I come in late, and I'll be like "PE let us out late," 'cuz sometimes they do let us out late. And then they'll [teachers] be like, "It doesn't matter, you're still late," or say something that'll get me mad, and I'll start defending myself like if they try to say, "Oh, 'cuz of that, you're not getting this." I get mad. (Interview Two)

Participants agreed that rules are necessary to ensure that learning can take place in the classroom, and they do want to learn. Their recommendations for teachers were realistic and sensible. The boys wanted to be respected and understood by their teachers. They also wanted to be active participants in their learning.

Conclusion

Chapter Four detailed the experiences and perceptions of African-American male students who have been involved with the discipline practices at a public, urban middle school. By using a multi-step inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002), I identified themes as they emerged from the participants. These students detailed how written and unwritten rules and the consequences of their actions affect them. Students wanted to do well in school and reported that they behave and perform better academically with teachers who are respectful and provide engaging lessons. They desired to work with teachers who care about them, support them, and teach them. They acknowledged the mistakes they have made, but wanted adults to know that they are kids with feelings. Chapter Five provides a summary of the findings, answers to the research questions, analysis of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Chapter Five is organized into six parts: summary of the study, discussion of findings, implications, recommendations, reflection on the research process, and conclusion. In the summary of the study, the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided this study are reiterated. The discussion of the findings presents answers to the research questions and explores the themes that emerged from the study. The implications section delineates how this case study informs the community at Meadows Middle School and public middle schools in general. Recommendations for future studies are addressed, and the chapter then concludes with a reflection upon how this study impacted my work as a researcher and administrator.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of students' perspectives of the disciplinary process at one public middle school. This study focused on the perceptions and experiences of African-American male students enrolled in the eighth grade at a public middle school in Los Angeles County. The following research questions were the focus of this study:

1. How do African-American students perceive and describe the teacher disciplinary referral process at a large, urban, public middle school?
2. How do African-American students perceive the impact of the school disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives?

Discussion of Findings

California Education Code §48900 outlines the allowable grounds for student suspension and expulsion, and subsection (k) allows students to be suspended or expelled if they have "disrupted school activities or otherwise willfully defied the valid authority of school personnel engaged in the performance of their duties" (p. 2). The Homestead School District's Parents' Rights and Responsibilities Handbook defined defiance as the "refusal to comply with reasonable requests of school personnel. Disrupting the daily routine of school activities" (p. 43). Both of these definitions can be interpreted many different ways, and each teacher sets his or her own standards for student behavior in the classroom. During the interviews and the focus group, the participants expressed a profound awareness of the unfairness they have seen in their classrooms, and they have pointed out that not all requests from adults seem reasonable to them.

The voices of the 11 participants painted a picture of the desire to excel in school in order to succeed in life. For the most part, the participants believe in the American Dream and the myth of meritocracy. They believe that if they work hard, they will be successful. The students believe that they are responsible for their actions and that they are capable of achieving success, however, they reported often feeling provoked by teachers who do not listen to them or understand them.

Following is a discussion of the findings in relation to the two research questions.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 sought to determine how African-American male students perceive and describe their experiences with the teacher disciplinary referral process at a large, urban, public middle school.

The majority of suspensions in the State of California are for defiance of authority (CDE DataQuest, 2013), and it is the teacher who typically defines the term defiance in the moment that they feel as if a student has defied his or her authority. When students were initially asked to define the term defiance, they used the words that they have heard from their teachers to define the term. According to the students, to be defiant is to be rude, disrespectful, and to talk back. However, during the course of the interviews and focus group, the participants were able to verbalize that they were angry with how various acts were arbitrarily considered defiant.

The participants described many of their behaviors that triggered an office referral as "no big thing" such as talking or playing with friends. When their misbehavior was more serious, they often felt like their teacher had provoked them. They felt that most of the referrals that they had received were unfair either because the teacher had antagonized them by speaking rudely or yelling, or they were not the only ones who were talking or misbehaving.

During the interviews and focus group, the participants concentrated on one or two teachers in whose classes they struggled. They often felt as if they could not do anything right in those classrooms, and when they did, they were not acknowledged for it. Participants indicated that it was difficult for them to stay in classrooms where they did not feel respected. They did not think that they were acting out on purpose as a show of resistance or as a way to get out of the class, but many of the boys felt like they had to stand up for themselves when a teacher disrespected them by yelling, calling them names, or assuming that their intentions were bad. Asserting themselves usually led to an office referral. Over and over, the participants expressed the desire to do well in school and each one identified himself as a "good kid."

Noguera (2008) found that African-American males often adopt behaviors that make them complicit in their own failure. As students get labeled as defiant, maladjusted, and difficult to deal with, they internalize these labels and act out in ways that match the expectations that have been set for them. Some of the participants may have internalized teachers' beliefs about them and acted in ways that the teacher expects.

This can be seen in the behaviors of Da'wan, Jamal, and Vance, each of whom had more than 20 office referrals in their three years at MMS. Jamal was habitually tardy to his second period science class, even though it was right next door to his first period class. Mr. Rogers, his science teacher, often yelled at him for being tardy. When Jamal yelled back, he would be referred to the office. Jamal also received many office referrals for talking in class, not working, or for cursing in class. Mr. Rogers wrote four of the six office referrals Jamal received in the eighth grade.

Each year a student had five or six teachers, but the majority of each participant's referrals came from one or two teachers in a given year. During the 2013-2014 school year, the ten eighth grade teachers wrote a total of 132 office referrals for all of the eighth grade students, and two teachers wrote 63% of those referrals. Ms. Lopez teaches math and wrote 50 of those referrals, and Mr. Rogers teaches science and wrote 34 referrals. Mr. Molina, a language arts teacher, did not write any office referrals that year. The seven remaining teachers wrote an average of nine referrals each. For the most part, these teachers see the same students in their classes, so clearly the discipline process at MMS is not applied uniformly or fairly.

Several of the participants had a long-term substitute during their seventh grade year. In four months, this substitute teacher wrote a total of 25 office referrals, and 11 office referrals for four of the boys in this study.

This is consistent with the literature. Skiba and colleagues (1997) found that at one school site, 17% of the teachers wrote 20 or more discipline referrals, which comprised 48.2% of the school's referrals for the year and indicates that problems other than student misbehavior are at play. In a study which compared 20 high schools with highest suspension rates to 20 schools with lowest rates in Kentucky, researchers found that the behaviors and characteristics of teachers have a great deal of influence on student outcomes. Teachers at the schools with low suspension rates challenged students academically, had high expectations for students and focused on positive and proactive disciplinary measures. Researchers observed staff at the high-suspending schools yelling at students in attempts to maintain order through the use of punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004).

Stereotypes that label African-American boys as too loud, aggressive, violent, or dumb can affect teachers' expectations of students (Noguera, 2008). Some teachers will act on these common stereotypes consciously or subconsciously, and once the student-teacher relationship becomes confrontational, it will most likely erode (Arriaza, 2003).

Ferguson's (2001) study found that the behavior of African-American boys is more likely to result in their exclusion from school because of how school staff interprets their behaviors. She concluded that the behaviors of African-American youth are often assessed as "sinister, intentional, fully conscious" (p. 83), while the behavior of other boys may be viewed as 'boys being boys.' Townsend (2000) attributed the higher rates of suspension of African-American

boys to the dissonance between the culture of White teachers and the cultural and physical styles of African-American adolescents. The stereotypes of African-American males as dangerous or threatening can also lead some teachers to overreact to minor challenges to their authority.

The boys interviewed for this study described some of their behaviors in ways that comport with the research, that is, as incidents that were misunderstood or misinterpreted. Once called out by the teacher, the misunderstandings escalated into arguments, and the boys find their way to the principal's office, which can lead to suspension. Often teachers considered the boys to be threatening, and teachers' fears and expectations can affect students' expectations of themselves (Ferguson, 2001). Common terms used in office referrals to describe students at Meadows Middle school were: "belligerent," "argumentative," "loud," and "disruptive."

Vance admitted to arguing with a teacher because the teacher had made him angry and said, "It's all coming out of anger. I know a couple of times I kinda wanted to get the teacher mad 'cuz he got me mad" (Interview Two).

Noguera (2008) recognized that African-American males do have some legitimate reasons to be angry, but he argues that this anger and readiness for conflict can be self-defeating and harmful to their well-being. Behaviors and attitudes borne out of anger may have a negative effect on a student's academic performance because many adults, especially women, may be less willing to help a young male who appears aggressive or angry.

Noguera (2008) found that while 90% of African-American students agreed or strongly agreed with the statements "I think education is important" and "I want to go to college," only 18% agreed with the statement "My teachers treat me fairly" (p. 34). All of the participants in this study believed that education is important and expressed the desire to go to college. Keon

was the only participant who said that all of his teachers treated him fairly. The remaining 10 participants could easily identify one or more teachers who had treated them unfairly. The feelings of anger were still palpable even a year or more after specific incidents.

According to Arriaza (2003), once the relationship between the student and teacher becomes confrontational, it is very difficult to rebuild. In his student focus group, Arriaza found that students were attempting to preserve their dignity when they talked back to a teacher who confronted them or treated them unfairly. Arriaza concluded that the cultural mismatch between students' preferred modes of behavior and the adults' cultural norms remain at the center of most conflict in the classroom.

The ideas of fairness and equal treatment were also common themes in Howard's (2014) work in which he compiled data from several studies with African-American males that he had conducted or had been involved with over the past five years. His participants consistently used phrases such as "treat us like others" and "just be fair" in interviews and focus groups. One young man desperately wanted school staff to talk to him instead of making assumptions about him, and he said, "just don't judge us, talk to us … we don't bite" (p. 104). Howard (2014) characterized his participants' responses as "a cry for being humanized" (p. 104).

The participants in this research study felt similarly. Jamal just wanted teachers to listen to him, and wished that some of the teachers would "stop getting attitude quick, and just listen. Like just listen up to what I'm trying to say instead of yelling" (Interview One). Michael wanted teachers to notice him when he is following the rules and doing his work, and he wondered, "how am I suppose to pass your class if like if you can't even notice me or anything?" (Interview One).

Research Question 2

The second central research question of the study aimed to address the following question: How do African-American students perceive the impact of the school disciplinary process on their academic and personal lives?

During the individual interviews and the focus group, participants mentioned the standard consequences given for office referrals at MMS: time out of the referring teacher's class for the remainder of the period, conference with an administrator or dean of students, lunch detention, community service, calls home, and suspension. Participants were angry and embarrassed when they were sent out of a classroom, either on a time-out or to the office with a referral. They knew that they were missing out on classwork and their grades would suffer.

Although Vance had received 21 office referrals and two suspensions while enrolled at MMS, he had a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 at the time of the interviews, which was the highest GPA of the participants in this study. The two participants with the most referrals and suspensions had the lowest GPAs. Da'wan had received 23 office referrals and six suspensions and had a GPA of 1.0. Jamal had received 26 office referrals and five suspensions and had a GPA of 1.6. The eight remaining participants had received an average of five office referrals each and had GPAs that ranged from 1.8 to 2.5.

According to Brown et al. (2012) students with multiple suspensions are less likely to be proficient or higher in English language arts or mathematics than their peers with no suspensions or with a single suspension. Suspensions related to defiance typically begin with an office referral from the teacher, and Noguera (2008) found that while schools typically punish children who are behind academically by removing them from class, students who are suspended most

frequently rarely change their behavior. Exclusionary discipline practices in schools do not address the reasons for the problematic behavior, and students who get labeled as troublemakers often internalize the label and act out in ways that match the teachers' expectations (Noguera, 2008). This cycle of punitive discipline can also make students feel uncared for at school and angry at the adults who are involved (Gregory et al., 2010), and students who are removed from class may lose interest in achieving academic success (Gregory et al., 2010).

Several of the participants were angry with some of their teachers. When Devante's seventh grade science teacher referred him to the office for getting a paper towel, Devante wanted to be moved out his class. During the interview a year later, Devante was still angry about the incident. After describing two separate incidents that occurred in the seventh grade with his music teacher and science teacher, Rashan said, "If there's a teacher I got a beef with, I'm gonna have a beef with them for the rest of my life" (Focus Group).

Participants were also angry when they missed assignments or were made to do "boring" assignments as punishment. They realized that this hurt them academically and resulted in lower grades on their report cards. While many of the participants were unsure of their plans for the future, they did believe that an education was necessary for a successful life. Sayon and Tavion were in the process of applying to private high schools and realized that their middle school grades and disciplinary record would affect them.

If the participants continue to miss out on instruction they will have a very difficult time earning the minimum number of credits needed to graduate from high school. The participants also recognized that the reason their parents or guardians become upset and punish them when they get in trouble at school is because they want them to have a better life. Tavion said that his

mom, who works for the Department of Motor Vehicles, wants him to succeed. During his first interview Tavion told me, "She says that she wants me to be better than what she is."

Typical consequences at home for misbehavior at school included being talked to, being grounded, and the loss of privileges such as watching television, playing with friends, or use of electronics. Several of the participants mentioned receiving a "whoopin" if they got into serious trouble at school, and all of the participants were worried about disappointing their families. The participants made it clear that their parents and guardians cared deeply about them and wanted them to stay in school and get good grades.

I met with Jamal's mother on many occasions, and she desperately wanted Jamal to improve his behavior and his grades. In our last meeting in the spring of his eighth grade year, Jamal's mom reminded him of a family friend they had recently seen begging for money at a gas station. With tears in her eyes, she told Jamal, "I don't want you to grow up and be a bum like him."

Analysis of the Data

I found that participants in this research study had a strong desire to be successful in school. They believed that education is important to achieving success as defined by having a good job that that will enable them to live more comfortably than their parents. The participants understood that the office referrals and suspensions they have received had a negative effect on their learning and grades and can limit their opportunities. They are beginning to understand that the consequences become more serious as they get older.

Researchers have found that most disciplinary problems that originate in the classroom are relatively minor disruptions and are interpersonal in nature (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008;

Sheets & Gay, 1996). The participants in this study do not come to school with intentions of disrupting class or disrespecting teachers. They report that the primary reasons they have misbehaved in the eyes of the teacher are that they are bored or finished with the assignment; they are just goofing off with their friends; or teachers disrespect them by yelling or making assumptions about them.

Parents also want their children to succeed. None of the participants wanted to disappoint their families, and they all said that notifying their parents was worse than any consequence that could be given at the school site. Consequences at home ranged from a lecture to a "whooping."

As a mandated child abuse reporter, I was concerned when I heard this term used during the interviews and focus group, but at no time did I believe that any of the participants were being abused. Students used the term to indicate that they were in "serious" trouble at home, and Delpit (1995) urged educators to understand the various ways in which parents show their concern for their children.

As a child, I heard my father say, "Don't make me take off my belt!" as my brothers and I were running around the house or arguing with each other. He did use the belt on our bottoms on occasion, but most often the threat was used to indicate that a line had been crossed, and it was time for us to settle down. I believe this to be the case with my participants as well. I have had to call child protective services in the past, but it has never been for students who talked about "getting a whoopin'" like these boys did.

Researchers have found that students were more likely to trust a teacher and feel obligated to comply with his or her authority if they believed the teacher cared about them

(Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Participants accepted the consequences of their actions when they knew they were in the wrong, but often became angry when they felt they had been misunderstood or falsely accused of a misdeed by their teacher. However, they knew that their parents would believe their teacher if he or she called home, and accepted any and all consequences from their parents. They did so because they knew that their parents loved them and wanted them to succeed in school and in life.

More than anything, participants wanted to be listened to and respected by teachers. They wanted lessons that are interesting and engaging. They wanted to work in groups, not only because it was fun, but also because they learned more than they would by working on their own. They wanted teachers who will teach them, support them, and guide them.

During his first interview, Vance told me that his language arts class was his favorite class for many of the reasons listed above. He said, "'Cuz we get in our groups, and she [the teacher] don't really mind us talking, and we get in our groups a lot. That's another thing I like about her class. I don't like working by myself ALL the time. It gets boring." When asked what else he liked about working in groups, Vance replied, "Like, it seem like I get more ideas, stuff I never would have thought of."

Implications

Broad Social Implications

The participants of this study desperately wanted teachers to listen to them and respect them. In front of their peers, many students will act as if they do not care what the teacher thinks of them. They might yell or curse, act as the "class clown," or they might be nonresponsive. However, their feelings are hurt and their self-esteem is damaged when they sense that the

teacher sees them as "bad" or as a troublemaker (Noguera, 2008). In classrooms where they "feel at home" or respected, the students are able to remain in class, participate in the lessons, and learn. I believe that all students should feel respected by teachers and staff in all classrooms and locations in schools.

Much of the research on the School-to-Prison Pipeline focuses on documenting the overt ways that the system moves young people from mainstream education to becoming high school dropouts and enmeshed in the criminal justice system. The research described suspension practices (Skiba, 2000; Skiba et al., 2002), the increase in the number of students suspended (CRDC, 2006), the growing use of police in schools and the increase in the number of students arrested in schools (Advancement Project, 2005). While these studies documented the problem and its policy implications, they did not explore how youth themselves describe their experiences of school exclusion.

This study investigated the extent to which students who have been referred to the office and suspended from school are cognizant of role of school suspension in the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The young men in this study are the very ones most likely to be imprisoned by virtue of their status and characteristics: their poverty, their race, and having a record of suspensions. The motivation underlying this research was to illuminate what the students themselves make of their position. I found that prior to their involvement in this study the participants had not heard of the term the "School-to-Prison Pipeline." They did, however, have a vague sense that "good" behavior and grades were important. Mathias, whose father is in prison, wants to be the first person in his family to go to college. He also explained that his uncle, who is in and out of jail, "doesn't get" his desire to succeed.

Implications for Middle School Teachers and Administrators

As a middle school administrator, I need to make sure that each and every student feels welcomed at the school and is respected by all teachers and staff. Researchers have found that when students lose respect for the teacher, student responsiveness decreases dramatically (Howard, 2002; Ware, 2006). Delpit (2012) asserted that many African-American children will perform better in classrooms where they believe the teacher cares about them because "they don't want to disappoint a teacher who they feel believes in them" (p. 86).

The findings from this study are in accordance with much of the literature, and I have several recommendations for my school site and district. First, this study, along with other research, highlights the need for additional training and support for teachers. Teachers have a significant impact on students, which can be either positive or negative. Results from this study support the need for positive student-teacher relationships. Teachers need to be aware of their students' cultural backgrounds and the knowledge and strengths they bring to the classroom (Gay, 2000). Teachers also need to be made aware of their physical and verbal actions which may be viewed as insensitive or offensive by some of their students. Sheets and Gay (1996) recommended "the creation of socially just and caring learning communities in the classroom in which both students' and teachers' voices, experiences, and perspectives are recognized, respected, and incorporated benefits everyone and everything. Teachers teach better, and students learn more" (p. 6).

In addition to providing cultural competency training for staff as a whole, site administrators may need to have difficult conversations with individual teachers who write too many office referrals. Office referral data without teacher names should be shared with staff on

a regular basis. It has been my experience that teachers often have no idea how they compare to their colleagues in terms of how they define minor misbehavior and how many office referrals they write. Teachers who over-refer need to be made aware of the fact that they are writing significantly more referrals than their colleagues who often have the same students in their classrooms. Teachers who over-refer should then be encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and behaviors in the classroom that might contribute to conflicts with students. Teachers should be provided with a mentor and the opportunity to observe teachers who are able to foster positive relationships with students.

Second, schools need to provide mentoring and support for students who receive many office referrals. Students can disengage from learning and act out in the classroom for many reasons. It is important that faculty and staff discover the root cause of this behavior and address the needs of the child so that he or she can be successful in school.

Third, this study revealed that our students need more information on high school graduation requirements, on the college application process, and on career options. Role models and mentors from various careers would be very beneficial for our students. The majority of the participants indicated that their goal was to play professional basketball or football, and only one student admitted that the odds of that happening were not very high. Young African-American boys need to be able to see themselves as more than an athlete or criminal.

Finally, students would benefit from more opportunities to interact with their peers in a positive manner. Participants often complained that they got in trouble for talking in class or they were late to class because they did not have enough time to socialize with their friends. Currently, we have two lunch periods, and each lunch period is a mixture of the three grade

levels. Participants suggested that we allow all eighth graders to attend one lunch period. They also suggested having a short nutrition period earlier in the day in order to have time to see their friends.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future research could also be undertaken in a few additional, divergent areas. First, this study should be extended to include both the teachers and the students. This will enable the researcher to glean a more in-depth understanding of the events that lead to an office referral at a school site from both the teachers' and the students' perspectives. Second, further research studies should be conducted to examine the importance of obtaining and maintaining a relationship between families and the school community. Third, longitudinal research initiatives are recommended, such as a long-term project that follows a cohort of students from ninth grade through twelfth grade. Finally, this study focused on African-American boys but excluded the experiences of children from other demographic categories. Accordingly, future studies should include African-American girls and youth of different socioeconomic and racial/cultural groups to better understand the perceptions and experiences related to school discipline for all students.

Reflection on the Research Findings

Self-reflection is a key component of critical narrative. Throughout the research process, I had to confront my positionality and reflexivity, and be self-reflective about my participation in the research process. I often wondered how my involvement would affect the participants' ability to speak openly and honestly in the interviews. I also reflected on my own role in the discipline process at Meadows Middle School (MMS) as well on my time as a classroom teacher.

I began my career as a fourth grade teacher at a Catholic school in the South Bronx

before I had a teaching credential or had taken any education classes. I had not been in an elementary school classroom since I had been a student. I remember feeling like a failure because my classroom did not look or sound like the ones I remembered from my childhood. My students did not sit quietly and listen to every word that I said. They talked a lot. In the spring of that year, I was taking my class on a field trip to the zoo, and to prepare, we watched a movie on animal habitats. I prefer to watch movies in silence, but my students talked throughout the entire movie. I asked them nicely to be quiet, pointed out that we could not hear if everyone was talking, and I even threatened to stop the movie if the talking continued. Then I stopped, and I listened to my students. They were excited about what they were seeing, and they were making connections to animal habitats they had seen before. I was the only one who was bothered by the talking. This was a powerful lesson for me.

During my last year as a classroom teacher, I had another "a-ha" moment. I was teaching fifth grade in my current school district in Los Angeles County, and again, I felt like a failure. There was one boy who disrupted many lessons, and nothing I did worked to curb his disruptions. One day, a teacher on special assignment came in to teach the class how to play a math game. My students were on their best behavior, except for Jesse. I was embarrassed by his outbursts and sent him out of the class. I called home that day and found out that Jesse was living with his uncle because his mother was in jail. When I learned why Jesse was craving so much attention, I changed the way I reacted to it. I still expected Jesse to follow classroom rules, but I no longer viewed him as "willfully defiant" nor did I view his actions as a personal affront to me as the teacher.

More recently, as an administrator at MMS, I had another illuminating reflection.

Students are rewarded at the end of each trimester if they have passing grades and satisfactory behavior marks in six out of seven classes, less than three office referrals, and fewer than three days of suspension. This is commonly referred to as being "In Tri," and students who are "In Tri" participate in the trimester rewards program held in the afternoon of the last day of school before winter break, spring break, and summer vacation. Students who are eligible can choose from the following activities: watching a movie, playing basketball, soccer or football, going to the computer lab, or making crafts. Eighth graders have extra incentives. We hold two evening dances and a get-away day to Mulligan's Family Fun Center. Students have to be "In Tri" in order to participate in these rewards. Also, in order to participate in our graduation ceremony, eighth grade students must be "In Tri" for at least two trimesters.

In January 2015, the principal and I held a meeting with the eighth grade students who were "Out of Tri" for the first trimester. There were only three girls in the group of 45. The principal and I were dismayed to see that 93% of the students in this group were boys, who were there for failing grades and/or unsatisfactory behavior marks. Seeing the library filled with Black and Brown boys who were struggling with academics and dehumanization was heart wrenching, especially with the images of the Ferguson protests still so vivid in my memory.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager was shot and killed by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. When the grand jury decided not to indict the police officer on November 24, 2014, protesters took to the streets in Ferguson, Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, and New York. Also in the news at the time was the fatal shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by a White police officer in Cleveland, Ohio. Rice was an African-American boy playing with a pellet gun, and yet the police officer described him as a "Black

male, maybe 20" (Dewan & Oppel, 2015).

African Americans are killed by police officers four and a half times more often than people of other races, and I had to wonder if I am complicit in this problem. In every interview and in the focus group for this dissertation research, each participant shared at least one instance in which a teacher antagonized him and the student felt like he had to stand up for himself. This often resulted in the student yelling, cursing, or walking away from the teacher. I fear that when I allow teachers to continue to maintain an adversarial role with students I am contributing to this problem.

As a current assistant principal who is in charge of student discipline, I always give the students an opportunity to explain their side of the story and reflect on their behavior when they receive an office referral. I have counseled many students on how to "survive" in classes with rigid teachers who over-refer. However, I rarely ask the teacher to reflect on his or her actions or feelings that led to the writing of the referral.

Upon reflection during this research process, I learned that it is much easier for me to have these conversations with students when I really need to be having the conversations with the teachers. While I still believe that getting along with difficult teachers, bosses, or coworkers is a valuable skill to possess, I now realize that I need to spend more time and energy helping teachers to reflect on their own beliefs, feelings and actions and to help them develop the necessary skills in order to work effectively with all of their students.

Howard (2014) found that many young African-American males believe that school personnel are often looking for them to be disruptive or waiting for the opportunity to send them to the office. One of his participants told of one teacher who was "always talking down to the

Black kids, sayin' stuff like 'y'all goin' straight to prison'" (p. 103).

I found it interesting that none of the participants brought up race during our conversations. They were interested in the data I shared regarding suspensions, but became visibly uncomfortable if I asked them anything directly about how race might contribute to any of their interactions with staff. I suspect that has something to do with the fact that I am a White woman, and the participants did not want to offend me. When I shared the story of my first year of teaching and becoming upset when my students were talking about the movie we were watching, they could relate. Many of them said that they get in trouble for talking even though they are talking about what they are working on at the time.

While the participants in my study had not heard of the School-to-Prison Pipeline, it is real, and they are at-risk. Teachers must be more cognizant of the effect that their words, actions, and demeanors have on their students.

Conclusion

> The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are assumed to be at-risk because they are too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, and to focused on sports … The trouble with Black boys is that most never have a chance to be thought of as potentially smart and talented or to demonstrate talents in science, music, or literature. The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are placed in schools where their needs for nurturing, support, and loving discipline are not met. Instead they are labeled, shunned, and treated in ways that create and reinforce an inevitable cycle of failure. (Noguera, 2008, p. xxi)

The purpose of this dissertation was to hear from the students themselves instead of relying of other people's assumptions of them. Many participants stated that teachers make too many assumptions about their behaviors and their intentions, and I am guilty of that as well. Before listening to these boys, I assumed that some of them did not really care about school and that they would rather be sent out of class than do the work. I was wrong. The boys felt angry and embarrassed when they had been sent out of the classroom, and they wanted to do well in school. The following quotes illustrate this fact, and I think it is important that the participants have the last say in this matter:

> When I try to sit down and do something right, they [teachers] don't pay attention or notice me, but as soon as I do something wrong they be right on it. (Michael, Interview One)

> Like regardless of anything [negative] teachers tell me, I'm gonna do my work. I'm trying to get a good grade, obviously. (Sayon)

> I want to graduate, and I want to get into the school I want to get in to. But in order for that to happen, I have to have good grades and behavior. (Tavion)

> Oh, I missed the day [when I left class]. That's the other thing with math. If you miss three minutes, you missed a whole lot. (Vance, Interview One)

I'll just say my behavior, on a scale from one to ten, is a six. I want to do good, but I've always been known as the class clown. People tell me, "You're funny. You're funny," and I guess I'm trying to keep up that ego. I don't want to—I want to be like—I want to get my grades up but it's not letting me. The ego is telling me go along with the flow. Don't do this. Talk this. But I'm telling you, ever since my grandma told me—like she broke it down—it changed me. And now that I know that, this is my life and I need to change it around. (Devante, Interview One)

APPENDIX A

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form

Date of Preparation April 26, 2014

Loyola Marymount University

Defining Defiance: African-American Middle School Students' Perspectives on the Impact of Teachers' Disciplinary Referrals

1) I hereby authorize Ms. Patricia Ray to include my child/ward in a Qualitative Research Project in conjunction with the Loyola Marymount University Doctorate of Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program.

2) My child/ward has been asked to participate in a research project, which is designed to understand how students understand and perceive the disciplinary process at school and will last for approximately two months.

3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my child's inclusion in this project is that: (a) he is an African-American male student at Prairie Vista Middle School, (b) he has received one or more disciplinary referrals for defiance in the past three years, and (c) he is willing to be interviewed.

4) I understand that if my child/ward is a subject, he will 1) participate in three 45-minute interviews. The primary investigator will conduct three semi-structured interviews. The interviews will take place during my child's TAS class, PE class, or after school hours and on school grounds, 2) be asked to keep a journal during the study. The primary investigator will be the only person who will view the journal.

These procedures have been explained to me by Patricia Ray, the principal investigator in this study.

5) I understand that my child/ward will be audiotaped in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for research purposes only and that my child's identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that my child has the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: feeling nervous or uncomfortable about answering certain questions, fear of possible alienation from, or difficulties with, friends, family members and/or teachers as a result of being viewed as an "informant" on the discipline policies at school, fear of sanctions if confidentiality is breached directly or through being observed during the interview process, and fear about disclosure of information about inappropriate school behavior (e.g., cutting classes).

7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are that my child's reflections on his thoughts and experiences with the disciplinary process may have a positive impact on his own behavior and may help to improve discipline policies and practices at the school.

8) I understand that alternative procedures are not necessary because interviews are a standard research protocol for qualitative studies.

9) I understand that Patricia Ray, who can be reached at 310-294-6340, will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.

10) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.

11) I understand that my child/ward has the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice to his standing at Prairie Vista Middle School.

12) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my child/ward's participation before the completion of the study.

13) I understand that no information that identifies my child/ward will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.

14) I understand that my child/ward has the right to refuse to answer any question that he may not wish to answer.

15) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 258-5465, david.hardy@lmu.edu.

26) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject, _____, is a minor (age_____)

Mother/Father/Guardian _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

Subject's Bill of Rights

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.

2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.

3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.

4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.

5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.

6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.

7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.

8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.

10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.

APPENDIX C

Summary of Project for Student Participants

Researcher: Patricia Ray

- Teacher for 20 years
- Assistant Principal for 4 years, 2 years at Elementary and 2 years at MMS
- Current student at Loyola Marymount University, working on Ed.D. in Educational Leadership for Social Justice

Background to Problem

- African-American students across the country are three times more likely to be referred to the office and five times more likely to be suspended from school than White students
- Students who get suspended from school:
    - Have lower grades and lower test scores
    - Are less likely to graduate from high school
    - Are more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system
- The majority of suspensions are for defiance of school rules
- In HSD, African Americans make up 20% of population but were 52% of all suspended students in 2011-2012
- African-American youth make up 16% of all youth in the general population, but
    - 30% of juvenile court referrals,
    - 38% of youth in residential placement, and
    - 58% of youth admitted to state adult prison

Research Questions

1. How do African-American students perceive and describe their experiences with the teacher disciplinary process at a large, urban, public middle school?

2. How do African-American students perceive the impact of the school disciplinary process in their academic and personal lives?

Methods

- **Interviews** (10 8th grade boys)
    - Two 45 minute interviews
    - To be held after school
    - You can decline to answer any question
    - Confidential and anonymous; you can pick your own pseudonym

- **Focus Group** (6 boys in the 8th grade)
    - One discussion with all 6 boys
    - 45 minutes to 1 hour in length
    - Discussion of the term defiance and disciplinary policies/procedures at school

Potential Risks of participating

- May feel nervous or uncomfortable about answering some questions – you can skip any question
- May fear difficulties with peers or teachers, because of your participation – no one will know you are participating; interviews will be held in the conference room in the library and your chances are small that you will seen
- May fear getting in trouble for any answers you give – your answers will be used for the study only; you will not get in trouble for anything you disclose

Potential Benefits of participating

- You might enjoy having a chance to think about a big problem that affects you and your friends
- You might help us improve the discipline policies and practices at the school

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Initial Interview

INTRODUCTION…
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! As you know, I want to find out what African-American middle school students think about the discipline policies and procedures at our school.
There are no right or wrong answers so please feel free to speak honestly about your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. You won't hurt my feelings if you criticize the way I have handled a referral in the past, and you won't be punished in any way for anything you tell me during this interview. Remember, I want you to help me improve the way we do things here. Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in this interview?

A. Introductory Questions

The questions below are intended as "ice-breakers", to provide the youth an opportunity to talk about themselves and feel comfortable in the interview setting.

1. How old are you?
2. Who do you live with?
3. What do you like to do after school or on weekends?
4. Do you know where you're going to high school?

1.

B. Defining Defiance

5. How would you define defiance?
   Probe: Have you been told recently that you were being defiant? What happened?
   Probe: Can you give an example of something that's happened recently in your classroom that you thought was defiant?
   Probe: Or that your teacher thought was defiant?

6. How do you think your teachers define defiance?
7. Is the definition the same in every classroom?
8. Are the consequences the same in every classroom?
9. When's the last time you received an office referral for defiance? Tell me everything that happened.

   Probe: What happened in the classroom?
   Probe: What did you do/say?
   Probe: What were other kids doing at the time?
   Probe: What did the teacher say/do?
   Probe: What happened in the office?

10. What do you think about your own behavior?

If troublesome behavior is acknowledged,
Probe: What causes you to act in ways that get you into trouble at school?
Probe: Are you doing it to get attention or respect from your peers?
Probe: Are you doing it to express your dislike/anger frustration with school or a particular teacher?
Probe: Does it have anything to do with what's going on at home or in your neighborhood?

If troublesome behavior is not acknowledged,
Probe: Why do you think you have gotten into trouble at school?
Probe: Do you think school rules are fair?
Probe: Do you think school rules are applied fairly?

Debrief Statement: Thank you so much for you honesty today. I am really looking forward to reading your journal and to talking again. Do you have any questions for me?

Second Interview

INTRODUCTION…
Thank you again for your help with my study. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers, and you won't be punished in any way for what you tell me during this interview. Everything you tell me is strictly confidential.

A. Review of 1st Interview

Review transcript and notes.

1. Is this an accurate reflection of our last conversation?
2. Is there anything you would like to add?
3. Is there anything you would like me to change?
4. Is there anything you would like me to remove altogether?

B. Consequences of Referrals/Suspensions

5. How do you feel when you get an office referral?
6. What are the consequences of an office referral?
   Probe: What happens while you're in the office?
   Probe: What happens at home?
   Probe: What happens when you return to that class?
7. Have you ever been suspended from school? Tell me about it.
   Probe: What were you suspended for?
   Probe: Did you know that was against the rules?

8. Besides missing school, were there any other consequences?
9. How did your mom or dad (or caregiver) react when you got suspended?
10. Why do you think they reacted that way?
11. Have you ever been suspended for 5 days or longer? Tell me about it.
    Probe: What was it like to be away from PVMS for so long?
    Probe: What was it like to return? How did your peers react? How did your teachers react?

C. Perceptions of Fairness

12. Did you know about the rules (you were accused of breaking) before you got in trouble?
13. What is your opinion about this rule?
14. Did you expect to be suspended from school? If not, what did you expect to happen?
15. Do you think what happened to you is fair? Why/why not? What did your family and friends think?
16. In general, do you think that teachers are fair in how they administer discipline?
17. Do you think that the rules are the same for everyone, or do you think some people get treated differently even though they break the same rules?
    Probe: [If yes] why do you think they get treated differently?
    Probe: Do you think that it has anything to do with race? gender?
    Probe: Are boys and girls treated the same?
18. If the answer identifies lack of fairness: How does the fact that some people get treated differently from others make you feel?
19. In general, what do you think about school rules?
    Probe: Do you think they are respectful of you as an African-American young man?
    Probe: How are they respectful or not?

Debrief: Thank you so much for your candidness and willingness to participate in my study. I look forward to sharing my findings with you. Do you have any questions for me?

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