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“ALL I NEEDED WAS SOMEBODY TO TALK TO ME”:
USING IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE TO
END EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES WITH BLACK GIRLS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
Education Systems Improvement Science

by
Aubrey Leigh Moreland
August 2021

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Black girls receive exclusionary punishment in schools at disproportionate rates in comparison to their White counterpart, often as a result of subjective behaviors such as disrespect, defiance, and disruption. Black girls are subjected to educator stereotypes about their behavior, and become disengaged academically, socially, and emotionally from schools. This dissertation in practice used phenomenological qualitative methodology to examine the problem of practice in a rural school district in South Carolina and provide recommendations based in improvement science. Data collection and analysis was founded in Critical Race Feminism, and included interviews with Black girls and teachers. Results revealed that Black girls need mutually respectful, empathetic relationships with their teachers, and opportunities to connect with other Black girls and form positive social relationships. Recommendations include methods to improve teachers' relationships and communication with Black girls and create opportunities for Black girls to come together in a supportive manner, and are outlined using PDSA cycles through improvement science. These will eliminate reactive and punitive forms of school discipline, and ultimately improve the social, emotional, and mental health well-being of Black girls.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the Black girls who are pushed out from schools, and have not had a voice or place in the classroom. I hope you are given the chance to have your story heard, and are able to experience the changes described in this work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my parents, siblings, family, and friends for their love and support throughout my academic and professional career. Thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Daniella Hall Sutherland, for her guidance, patience, and confidence throughout this dissertation process, as well as my coursework. You are a true mentor and model for leadership in education and academia! Thank you also to my committee members, Dr. Jacquelynn Malloy, Dr. Michelle Boettcher, and Dr. Jennie Rakestraw, for your excitement and feedback about my work—I appreciate your commitment and involvement from start to finish. I would not be successfully completing this dissertation if it weren't for my Clemson cohort members. I am so fortunate to have worked alongside such dedicated educators, and received your never-ending support. Thank you also to my professional coworkers who have always cheered me on, and to the teachers and Black girls who were willing to participate in this important work—your openness and honesty was invaluable.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Disparities in the educational experiences of Black students have been well-documented, with ample discussion around key concepts such as the academic achievement gap and school-to-prison pipeline (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Vanneman et al., 2009; Gregory et al., 2010). Black students have historically endured substandard educational experiences. This has manifested academically in the form of standardized test scores, dropout rates and advanced placement enrollment (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and also behaviorally, as evidenced by the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline, resulting in greater likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system and future incarceration (Heitzig, 2014). These are noteworthy discussion points when considering issues surrounding race from a bird's eye view in education. However, said points are enormous challenges that require further examination in order to understand their origins and potential pathways for improvement in practice.

This is not to say that the lens through which these challenges are viewed has remained at a wide angle. Efforts have been made to understand these issues from the perspective of specific gender needs (Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002). Currently, the bulk of existing research on the educational challenges of Black students has almost exclusively centered on males, with ample literature available on their experiences, particularly with regard to school discipline (Howard, 2013; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). While this adds depth to our understanding of the needs of Black students, existing research on Black girls and their experiences in schools is minimal by comparison.

Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and Fordham (1993) pioneered the exploration of disproportionate experiences of Black girls in schools specifically in relation to their behavior, underscoring the concept of intersectionality. This framework posits that Black girls live at a crossroads of race and gender, and have experiences that cannot be defined by mutually exclusive categories, such as “Black” or “female” (Bowleg, 2012). These scholars began the intersectionality discussion in relation to specific stereotypes that perpetuate Black girls’ lack of access to an equitable experience in education. These included perceived “loudness,” and academic success being incompatible with societal expectations of the Black girl persona (Fordham, 1993). Confirmation of these findings have been documented (e.g. Koonce, 2012; Morris, 2007), with recent studies exploring how perceptions of adults negatively impact the treatment of Black girls in schools (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake & Epstein, 2019) and how school discipline policies maintain and potentially encourage this maltreatment (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). Morris (2016) extensively outlined the negative experiences of Black girls in schools, citing contributions to the school-to-prison pipeline including zero-tolerance policies and academic failure being set as their status quo. Additional sources support these findings, and demanded justice and reform for Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2012). While inequities have been established, few studies have evidence of the direction reform can take to eradicate them (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake & Epstein, 2019), and many identify the need for additional research in this area (Morris 2012; 2016).

As inequities are examined progressively closer at a specific intersection of race and gender, we can begin to evaluate how Black girls experience school discipline. Literature has emerged indicating that exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, are

used with Black girls students at disproportionate rates in comparison to their White counterpart (Blake et al., 2011; Inniss-Thompson, 2018; Wallace et al., 2008). These punitive consequences contribute to Black girls' sentencing to the school-to-prison-pipeline—a topic that has predominantly surrounded outcomes for Black males (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Heitzig, 2014; Monroe, 2005).

The inequities our Black girls face in schools, particularly those related to behavior and discipline, cannot be ignored. Black girls are found to face higher rates of suspension in comparison to all other girls' racial groups, as well as White males (Wallace et al., 2008). In contrast, White girls have the lowest rates of suspension in comparison to any gender-racial group, except for Asian American girls (Wallace et al., 2008). With Black girls comprising approximately 7% of the public school student population, and White girls' representation over triple that (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020), there are clear inequities in the disciplinary consequences being assigned across racial groups.

It is of extreme importance to note that the notable differences in suspension rates are not due to Black girls engaging in more problematic behaviors, but that they are recipients of exclusionary discipline due to implicit racial biases in how educators discipline these students. Overall, Black girls are more likely to receive a discipline referral, and are more likely to be disciplined for a minor offense than their White counterpart (Morris & Perry, 2017). Additionally, Black girls are punished for subjective behaviors, such as disobedience, defiance, dress code violations, and disruptive behavior, versus those that White girls are punished for, such as drug/alcohol possession and vandalism, which are more objective in nature (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2011, Morris & Perry, 2017). This discrepancy reflects racial biases about

Black girls and their behavior—an established concern in school discipline for Black students regardless of gender—where Black students’ punishment is harsher than that of White students, even for the same offense (Annamma et al., 2019; Kinsler, 2011). For Black girls specifically, these racial biases stem from deeply engrained in societal beliefs about stereotypes and their behavior. Terms such as ‘disobedient’ and ‘defiant’ in reference to Black girls’ behavior reflects historically relevant challenges for this group during slavery, where a Black girl speaking out or standing up for one’s self was interpreted as socially deviant and unacceptable (Wun, 2016). Today, Black girls’ behavior continues to be misinterpreted through a lens of racial bias and viewed as in need of punishment and correction, taking form in over-surveillance, over-policing, school exclusion, and incarceration (Morris, 2012; 2016).

School discipline inequities have both long- and short-term implications for Black girls. Receiving days of out of school suspension equate to lost seat time, or time spent out of the classroom setting. When Black girls are not in the classroom, they are missing instruction which can create or worsen academic deficits (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Long-term implications include disengagement from school (particularly when there is academic failure), increasing the likelihood of high school non-completion (Arcia, 2006). There is also an increased probability of involvement with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system, and later, incarceration (Heitzeg, 2014; Morris, 2012).

The purpose of my dissertation is to expand upon current literature regarding issues in school discipline for Black girls, and use an Improvement Science research design to identify recommendations for intervention and further research. While literature has emerged that examines the issue as a whole, very little of the empirical work has established *how* educators

can change discipline practices to better serve Black girls in schools. This dissertation in practice will address this crucial gap by obtaining data from the source—both students and educators— in a real-world scenario of gender and racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline. The findings will be utilized to alter day to day educational and disciplinary practices, while monitoring their effectiveness for improving Black girls’ experiences. An approach in Improvement Science is an excellent method for execution, with short cycles of intervention and adjustments made as needed. My dissertation will not only expand the discussion on Black girls and school discipline, but transfer knowledge to practice by identifying evidence-based methods of reform.

Significance within the Research Context

As the researcher, I will conduct this study as a school psychologist in the public school setting. The school district I serve, and the proposed setting for this research, is situated in rural South Carolina. The school district is comprised of approximately 5,500 students. Of those students, 46% are Black/African American, 42% are White, and the remaining 12% include Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian students, or those identifying as 2 or more races. Black girls comprise approximately a quarter of the overall student population (23 percent), and almost half of the students who are girls (47 percent). See Table 1 for a complete breakdown of the racial and gender representation within this school district. Given the substantial representation of Black girls in the district’s student population, issues related to this specific racial and gender identity subgroup are especially relevant.

Black/African American	White	Other (Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, 2 or more races)
Racial Representation in Overall Student Population		
46%	42%	12%
Gender Representation in Overall Student Population		
M / F 22% / 23%	M / F 22% / 19%	M / F 5% / 6%
Gender Representation Within Racial Group		
M / F 49% / 51%	M / F 52% / 48%	M / F 49% / 51%
Racial Representation Within Female Group		
48%	40%	12%

Table 1.1: Racial Group and Gender Representation in School District

Discipline data for the school district provides an even more compelling case. The use of exclusionary discipline in the school district as a whole is apparent, with almost 6,400 days of instruction in the 2018-19 school year lost due to suspension or expulsion for discipline infractions. Larger school districts may not see the weight this statistic carries, however the size of the district makes this rate more meaningful— this statistic equates to over 1 day of lost instruction per student in the district due to discipline. This regrettable practice has been a consistent trend in the district for at least the 3 school years prior, with even a slight uptick in the 2018-19 school year. Earlier years likely had similar rates of use of exclusionary discipline, however accurate data was not maintained at that time. Thus, the overuse of suspension and expulsion is a longstanding problem for our school district in general.

However, when considering race within the context of school discipline practices, evidence of a need for change becomes even more significant. Disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with Black students is apparent, with 67% of days of suspension being assigned to Black students, in comparison to White students receiving only 23% of days of suspension. The scale of disproportion tips further when looking at rates of exclusionary discipline for Black girls—71% of assigned days of suspension assigned to students who were girls were black, versus 21% for White girls. This equates to Black girls receiving 3.4 days of suspension for every 1 day their White counterpart received. Additionally, when considering the actual infractions leading to their suspension, Black girls most often received office referrals for cutting class, refusal, disrupting class, and disrespect. Three of the 4 types of infractions Black girls received most often (refusal, disrupting class, disrespect) are highly subjective to the individual making the discipline referral—a pattern documented in existing literature (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2011; Wun, 2016). Their White counterparts received discipline referrals for less subjective infractions, including tardiness and leaving class (cutting class and refusal were common between the groups).

In summary, the school district in which I am proposing this research take place in is an unfortunate example of the reality of school discipline experiences for Black girls. Thus, when conducting this dissertation in practice, the school district in which the research will be conducted is an exceptional sample when examining school discipline practices for Black girls.

Literature Review

The use of exclusionary discipline is not an uncommon practice in education. Over 5% of public school students received one or more days of out of school suspension in 2013-14

(“Indicator 15: Retention, Suspension, and Expulsion”, 2019). Further, the negative outcomes that ensue with its use are well-established across racial groups (Skiba et al., 2016). However, closer examination of discipline and its impacts for Black girls specifically is crucial in order to understand how educators can better serve this population of students. In the following sections, I will discuss scholarship relevant to this problem of practice in education, outlined in 5 categories: Disproportionate Discipline, Disciplined Behaviors, Impacts of Exclusionary Discipline, Challenges and Theoretical Implications, and Considerations for Change: An Approach in Improvement Science.

Disproportionate Discipline

To understand the significance of issues related to school discipline practices for Black girls, it is important to grasp the magnitude of the disproportionate rates Black girls are subjected to exclusionary discipline practices. Exclusionary discipline practices include those that remove students from the learning environment, such as in-school suspension, out of school suspension, and expulsion (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2014). It is well-established that Black students as a whole receive greater rates of exclusionary discipline in comparison to their White counterparts (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). While much attention has been given to the rates of suspension and expulsion for Black males (Monroe, 2005), the statistics for Black girls are just as staggering, particularly in comparison to White girls.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education indicates that in the school year of 2015-2016, 50% of girls receiving 1 or more days of out of school suspension were Black, and 29% of girls that were arrested in schools were Black (Inniss-Thompson, 2018). Additional data

analyzed for Northern/Northeastern urban school districts revealed that Black girls were suspended up to 12 times the rate of White girls, with expulsion rates soaring up to 53 times that of their White counterpart—this statistic being especially noteworthy given that no White girls were expelled based on the data collected (Crenshaw et al. 2015).

Similar findings are found in Southern states. This region is of particular interest in the vein of race and gender, given the historical implications of slavery. School districts in this region grapple with modern-day impacts of unresolved racial biases, reflected in the actions toward and treatment of Black students (Gill et al., 2018). The historical Black-White rift in the Southern region creates unfortunate circumstances for Black students and perpetuates racial biases. This has obvious impacts on the treatment of Black girls, as this region of the United States has the highest prevalence of Black girls receiving multiple out of school suspensions or arrests (Inniss-Thompson, 2018). Specifically, in 2011-2012, the highest rates of disproportionate discipline were found in Mississippi—where 80% of girls suspended were Black, and in Louisiana—where 77% of girls expelled were Black (Smith & Harper, 2015).

When considering the state of South Carolina, we are not free of this epidemic in the Southern region of the United States. Approximately 65% of girls suspended and expelled in South Carolina were Black in the 2011-2012 school year (Smith & Harper, 2015). With Black students comprising 36% of the South Carolina student population at that time, and Black girls making up about half that percentage (Smith & Harper, 2015), the rates of disproportion become apparent, and attention must be given to exclusionary discipline practices in our state.

Disciplined Behaviors

Beyond the numbers indicating inequitable discipline practices for Black girls, considering the types of behaviors they are disciplined for is just as important. Black girls are subjected to various stereotypes, such as being loud, disrespectful, and aggressive (Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016). The types of infractions Black girls are punished for in schools are reflective of these assumptions about their behavior. Black girls often receive discipline referrals for behaviors such as defiance, disruption, dress code violations, profane language, and physical aggression (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2011; Wun, 2016). Findings have also shown that Black girls are over 2 times more likely to receive an office referral for behavior considered “disobedient” in comparison to White girls (Morris & Perry, 2017).

The infractions outlined above are highly subjective and are based on the interpretations of behavior, particularly in comparison to discipline referrals made for White girls, who are more likely to receive punishment for objective offenses such as drug/alcohol possession or vandalism (Annamma et al., 2019). Behaviors considered aggressive or disobedient are considered problematic due to their misalignment with traditional forms of the White female (Morris, 2007; Wun, 2016). Thus, adult perceptions of misbehavior stem from existing biases, and further perpetuate marginalization based on race and gender (Morris & Perry, 2017).

Impacts of Exclusionary Discipline

The impacts of exclusionary discipline practices have been well-documented by researchers. Both in- and out of school suspensions have been attributed to poor academic performance, as well as an increased likelihood of not completing high school (Arcia, 2006; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Academic performance is compromised by lost seat time, which can exacerbate pre-existing academic skill deficits for students. This is especially unfortunate given

that students with poor academic performance are more likely to be the recipients of out of school suspension (Arcia, 2006). Discipline and achievement gaps quickly become interrelated, with educational practices in both areas dependent on one another (Gregory et al., 2010). The end result of suspension and expulsion becomes student disengagement, further contributing to negative academic impacts and likelihood of additional discipline incidents (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2014)

The consequences of exclusionary discipline are particularly concerning for Black girls. The school-to-prison pipeline is a term for the funneling of students of color out of schools and into the juvenile justice system, and later incarceration as a result of exclusionary discipline (Heitzeg, 2014). Black males have received the bulk of attention on issues contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline, and much of theory surrounding its relevancy for Black girls is based on what is known about the Black male counterpart (Morris, 2012). Given what is known about the importance of viewing issues from an intersectionality standpoint for Black girls, it is important to analyze issues surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline from this same perspective.

Black girls' experiences with the school-to-prison pipeline are maintained by zero-tolerance policies. This is a general term for rules surrounding consequences and punishment for infractions in schools, which were designed to address behavior and safety concerns in schools (Heitzeg, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies for Black girls may mean harsher punishments for minor infractions, as well as inconsistent implementation of policies (American Psychological Association, 2008), meaning their use can easily fall prey to inherent educator biases about Black girls and their behavior. Though intended to promote safety in schools, perceptions Black girls have of zero-tolerance enforcement—such as increased police presence, surveillance, and metal

detectors—reflect feelings of insecurity, and that discipline is priority over academics in the school environment (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Hines-Diatri & Carter Andrews, 2017). As Black girls are subjected to adultification, they are viewed as less innocent and treated in developmentally inappropriate ways (Blake & Epstein, 2019). This increases their likelihood of being referred to or having interaction with law enforcement, as perceptions that they “should know better” are portrayed by adults (Blake & Epstein, 2019). Paired with limited empathy and nurturing from adults at school, zero-tolerance policies contribute to the pattern of pushing Black girls out of schools, and potentially into the criminal justice system (Morris, 2016).

Challenges and Theoretical Implications

Challenges Black girls face have typically been absorbed into those that Black students face overall. However, Black girls have unique experiences within their specific identity, which lies at the intersection of race and gender. These experiences stem from ingrained perceptions that Black girls are deviant from a White patriarchal society, given historical implications surrounding slavery while being viewed as property and of value to reproduce slaves (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). This becomes evident when examining the inequitable treatment of Black girls, particularly related to what has been termed adultification. Adultification refers to the assumption that Black girls are older and more mature than they actually are (Epstein et al., 2017). The result of this bias are differential perceptions—that Black girls are independent, and are in less need of support, nurturing, and protection (Epstein et al., 2017). Subsequent impacts of these assumptions are lessened adult empathy, and harsher punishments for behavior (Blake & Epstein, 2019). These findings have substantial implications for Black girls in schools.

Relationships with educators can be unsupportive and lacking empathy, making school an isolated place that requires self-reliance.

Additional obstacles Black girls face are stereotypes and consequences surrounding their voice, both literally and figuratively. Black girls have received criticism for their perceived “loudness” (Morris, 2007). This has also been termed “talking with attitude”—in which teachers perceive Black girls’ tone and volume as an act of defiance (Koonce, 2012). Biases surrounding the speech of Black girls are noteworthy, given the theory that Black girls’ loudness is a form of speaking out against their voice being silenced throughout history and an act of resisting oppression (Koonce, 2012; Morris, 2016). In the school setting, this may take the form of office referrals being made for highly subjective behaviors, likely related to perceptions of loudness, such as defiance (Blake et al., 2011). These biases confirm that Black girls’ behavior is punishable given that it does not conform to traditional ideologies of a female identity: quiet, conforming, and obedient (Blake et al., 2011).

Considerations for Change: An Approach in Improvement Science

Issues of inequitable discipline practices for Black students are well-grounded, and literature is emerging regarding discipline practices for Black girls specifically. While further research is still needed to understand discipline inequities for Black girls, relatively little is known regarding evidence-based practices to improve discipline practices in the school setting. Research shows promising strategies to address this issue for Black students as a whole (e.g. Gregory et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2017; Rausch et al., 2016). However when considering the unique challenges Black girls face in comparison to other racial subgroups, it is important to explore effective recommendations for practice for Black girls specifically. This section outlines

the utility of Improvement Science for future research to mitigate the over-use of exclusionary discipline with Black girls.

Improvement Science is characterized by short cycles of intervention and examination, termed “Plan, Do, Study, Act” (Bryk et al., 2017). This approach is particularly relevant to educational research and practice as it is starkly different from traditional models of experimental research, which occur in highly controlled environments—something that is not realistic or relevant in education (Lewis, 2015). Instead, Improvement Science gives emphasis to variation in outcomes, and works toward generalizing results into a variety of contexts (Lewis, 2015). Improvement Science integrates multiple components relevant to discipline reform in education, including determining why the problem exists, how to structure reform, and maintaining a user-centered approach (Bryk et al., 2017). Much of existing literature highlights the existence of a problem and recommendations based on theory, thus, research based in Improvement Science is a great step beyond what current methodologies are employing. A user-centered approach ensures that findings are applicable and meaningful to educators, which is a primary goal in educational research.

The “Plan, Do, Study, Act” cycle in Improvement Science is particularly salient for future research on exclusionary discipline and Black girls. With regard to the “Plan” phase, this model ensures that a proactive approach is taken to school discipline, rather than a reactive basis that results in suspension and expulsion (Fenning & Rose, 2007). This proactivity allows for consideration of factors that will impact Black girls and specific challenges within a school building. The “Study” phase allows for discipline data to be closely examined, with racial, gender, and type of infraction data interrogated. This is a crucial component of discipline reform,

as it aids in determining specific areas in need of intervention, and determining the effectiveness of plans put in place (Bryk et al., 2017; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Repeated, short-term cycles of “Plan, Do, Study, Act” allows for frequent adjustment, ensuring that a school or district is not locked in to one particular reform effort without truly knowing the extent of its effectiveness (Bryk et al., 2017).

Research Questions

The purpose of this dissertation in practice is to explore the following research questions related to issues surrounding exclusionary school discipline and Black girls:

- How can educators utilize feedback from Black girls to inform the discipline practices used with them?
- How do educators perceive discipline practices with Black girls; what feedback can they provide regarding alternatives to exclusionary discipline?
- What can be learned from student and educator perspectives to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline with Black girls?

These research questions are significant for this problem of practice for multiple reasons. First, existing literature on school discipline practices in relation to Black girls maintains a focus on the problem itself. This proposal for a dissertation in practice extends beyond the problem, and begins the next vital step of facilitating change to address the problem of practice. Additionally, the research questions I pose require going directly to the source—the students and educators who this research impacts the most.

Overall, the research questions I pose are process-oriented, and focus on understanding the implications of the problem of practice, versus further establishing that the problem exists.

These questions continue the conversation into what changes and interventions can be implemented, and lend well to Improvement Science. Process-oriented research questions reflect a cyclic train of thought that is also reflected in an Improvement Science research design, and demonstrate the ongoing data collection and analysis conducted in PDSA cycles. In summary, my research questions move beyond simply answering whether or not, or the degree to which a problem exists, and allow for fluid research cycles that help educators understand the problem of practice and make subsequent improvements.

Theoretical Framework

Given the biases surrounding Black girls and the implications for educational practice, the appropriate theoretical framework must be identified when conducting research related to this subgroup of students. The realities of Black girls are not limited to those explained by theories regarding either gender or race separately, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) or feminism, which often focus on Black boys and White girls respectively (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). CRT explores the inequities experienced by racial groups— specifically African Americans— based on deeply engrained historical and societal injustices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). When viewing education from the stance of CRT, historical implications show that education has been, and continues to be, a service that White people have been entitled to (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT is a crucial framework when considering inequities in education for Black students as a whole, however encompass the variety of experiences Black boys and girls have. Girls have a considerably different experience in education including challenges such as diminished expectations, stereotyping, and limited opportunities (Klein, 2007), but a framework so broad as feminism fails to examine the specific experiences of further subgroups including

race, disability, and sexual orientation. CRT and feminism act as separate silos, and reflect a need for a framework founded in intersectionality (Bowleg, 2012).

Black girls' experiences cannot be interpreted through the lens of being a girl, independent of being Black, and vice versa (Morris, 2007; Howard & Navarro, 2016). Critical Race Feminism (CRF) is a theoretical approach that aims to explore and understand the prejudices Black girls face, and systems that contribute to their marginalization (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). CRF sets sights on forms of discrimination due to the *intersections* of race, class, and gender, whereas CRT addresses issues solely based around race (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). CRT alone does not encompass the unique needs and experiences of Black women/girls (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). This is a much-needed framework for educational research, given the lack of attention this subgroup receives in research. Lastly, CRF moves research away from a deficit-focused approach when discussing Black girls, and provides a framework centered on their strengths and resilience (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

CRF is a crucial framework when approaching this dissertation in practice, as it shifts reform efforts in the direction of considering the multiple identities of Black girls by simultaneously addressing gender and racial oppression, nonexclusive of one another (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Given the stereotypes that influence school discipline practices with Black girls, there is a clear need for an approach that utilizes intersectionality (Blake et al., 2011; Morris & Perry, 2017). In this dissertation in practice, CRF will influence the types of data collected, their interpretation and representation, and subsequent recommendations. By obtaining and interpreting findings through a lens of both race and gender, a one-size-fits all approach of

exclusionary discipline can end, and improvements in educators' practices with Black girls can begin.

Conclusion

Black girls' identities exist at the intersection of race and gender, and often other factors including poverty, sexuality, and disability. Lack of awareness and understanding of their individual needs results in biases surrounding their identity, that they are loud, aggressive, and disrespectful. This differential treatment is exacerbated by perceptions of less innocence and needing less support and empathy. The byproduct of these assumptions in schools comes in the form of suspension and expulsion at disproportionate rates compared to their White counterpart. Black girls inevitably become a part of the school-to-prison pipeline, though they often are not the focal point of conversation when it is discussed. Research on the inequities Black girls experience is sparse compared to the widespread literature available for Black males in education. Additional research is needed to better understand the challenges Black girls face with school discipline, and more importantly to establish evidence-based practices and approaches to alleviate them. Future research that integrates qualitative methodology and Improvement Science is necessary to fill this void in educational research and facilitate systemic school discipline reform for our Black girls.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

The purpose of this dissertation in practice is to explore how educators can improve current school discipline practices, specifically in order to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline with Black girls; utilize feedback from Black girls and their educators to inform changes to school discipline practices; and determine what practices are useful in reforming school discipline for Black girls specifically. I am using a qualitative methodological design, with a phenomenological approach. This methodological design obtains data from sources such as observations and interviews to understand first-hand experiences of a specific phenomenon, which will aid in identifying overarching themes and answer research questions I pose (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the following sections, I outline the methodology, methods of data collection, and data analysis procedures to be used in this qualitative dissertation.

Methodology

For this dissertation in practice, I am using a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. While more traditional quantitative methods typically yield closed-ended responses through the use of instrumentation (i.e. surveys, ratings, performance scores), qualitative methodology utilizes an open-ended approach, where data can freely emerge without limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative design uses multiple sources of data, which are collected in the natural setting in which experiences take place (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By collecting data in a real-world setting where the problem of practice exists, findings will be an accurate representation of participants' experiences. Further, this methodology coincides with a key characteristic of improvement science, that one must go directly to and

observe the problem closely to fully understand it, and subsequently identify appropriate solutions (Bryk et al., 2018).

A qualitative methods design requires identifying a specific type of qualitative study that will be conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifying the qualitative methodology is necessary, as it conveys the goal of the research and informs most aspects of research design, including data collection, site selection, participant selection, and theoretical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018a). For this research, I employ a phenomenological approach. The goal of phenomenology is for a specific phenomenon, or similar experience across individuals to be examined and better understood (Creswell & Poth, 2018a). In phenomenological research, the researcher “describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). More specifically, a phenomenological study identifies the phenomenon, examines how individuals experience the phenomenon, and findings are used to describe the “essence” of the experience for all individuals in the population (Creswell & Poth, 2018a). A phenomenological approach is meaningful for this particular research topic given that the experiences of Black girls have often been overlooked, and efforts to serve them in an educational setting are not tailored to their specific needs. Examining the phenomenon of exclusionary discipline for this population from their own vantage point will provide first-hand accounts and relevant feedback on how reform can take place. Phenomenology not only provides space for Black girls to describe their experiences, but also creates an opportunity to extend the conversation about change that actually meets their needs.

Theoretical Rationale

Given the goal for an approach in Critical Race Feminism, I selected a phenomenological qualitative design for my research. Black girls have historically been denied access to many rights including a voice, or say in how they are treated and valued in society. When speaking out against their marginalization, they are deemed too loud, too aggressive, and combative (Morris, 2007; Wun, 2016). Thus, silence has inevitably become a strategy to avoid further mistreatment, as there are known consequences for speaking up (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Further, Black girls' behavior is interpreted as disobedient, when often they are attempting to communicate a personal struggle (Wun, 2016). My dissertation takes into account critical race and feminist frameworks in the methodological design, so that the research will serve as a platform for Black girls to speak on their perspectives and treatment regarding school discipline, free of negative feedback or assumptions. By using interviews, I will capture their voices, as their own words become the data used to understand the challenges they face, and subsequently facilitate change. This approach reflects the use of Critical Race Feminism, which advocates for Black girls' perspectives to be prioritized when considering challenges they face.

Methods of Data Collection

With regard to the methods used, I will collect data from two different sources including interviews with Black girls and their teachers. I will coordinate with school site administrators to first obtain access to the site and confirm their comfortability and willingness for the school to participate. Then, I will work with administrators to identify potential participants that meet predetermined purposive sampling requirements. Informed consent will be distributed to the students, and signed parent consent for participants under age 18 will be required prior to interviews beginning. Teachers will simultaneously be recruited, with their informed consent

distributed. Upon providing informed consent to teachers and obtaining signed parent consent for students, interviews will be conducted.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are the source of qualitative data for this dissertation. Interviews are an essential data collection method for a phenomenological study, as they obtain in-person, real accounts of experiences related to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018b). While interviews have a protocol, there is flexibility in additional questions that can be asked if specific topics require further probing or exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2018b). This is especially beneficial given the samples that will be interviewed, as Black girls have highly individual accounts of experiences with school discipline. Critical Race Feminism will influence interviews with Black girls, as the questions directly relate to their personal experiences, thoughts, and reactions to discipline and methods of reform. Girls will be asked to give examples of their experiences, as well as their personal ideas of improvements to be made.

Interviews will be conducted with a sample of Black girls and a sample of teachers. The student sample will consist of 2 to 6 Black girls. A group of potential participants will be compiled based on data from the school's discipline database. This method of purposive sampling ensures that participants will provide personal accounts that allow the problem of practice to be understood, and research questions to be answered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I will recruit participants using methods approved by the school site administration. This may include phone calls to parents to explain the purpose of the research and discuss informed consent, and also discuss the purpose of the research to the potential participants. No more than 6 participants will be used in order to manage time and data appropriately. Given the

phenomenological approach of the qualitative portion of my research, this sample size is appropriate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By limiting the number of participants, greater depth of interviews can be accomplished versus a high number of participants, with minimal depth of engagement.

The second sample of participants who will be interviewed are teachers at the same school site as the student sample. There are no specific requirements in order for teachers to be eligible participants, other than working directly with Black girls (which all teachers do).

Interviews will be conducted individually, and will last for a minimum of 30 minutes. The protocol used for student interviews can be found in Appendix A, and the protocol for teacher interviews can be found in Appendix B. Interviews will be recorded using an electronic recording device which will be passcode secured, and the audio recordings will be uploaded to a computer that also has a passcode requirement for access. Interviews will be transcribed, and transcriptions will also be stored on a computer with a passcode requirement for access. Transcriptions will not include any identifying information of the participants.

Due to the specific criteria for sampling, the sensitive nature of attitudes and perspectives toward school procedures, as well as students' school discipline history and consequences, maintaining participant confidentiality is crucial. Pseudonyms will be given to both student and teacher interview participants to ensure their identity is kept anonymous (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, any other identifying information provided by the participant during interviews will be edited to de-identify the participant. Direct quotes that could allow a reader to identify the participant will not be used in reported findings.

Improvement Science Design

Utilizing Improvement Science as a modality for change is a key element that differentiates my dissertation from the literature currently available. My dissertation extends the discussion to facilitate reform in school discipline for Black girls specifically, which will be accomplished by centering results and recommendations on improvement science. Improvement Science uses Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles to fully understand a problem, execute interventions, examine effectiveness, and make adjustments as needed (Bryk et al., 2017). The culmination of findings will result in a discussion of specific interventions for schools to consider, and outlines step-by-step processes to pilot them using PDSA cycles, while centering Black girls in their implementation.

Reflexivity and Positionality Statement

As the researcher, I come to this study as a school psychologist in the public school setting. While I am a member of my school leadership team, I am not considered an administrator that directly enforces discipline practices. That being said, I do not act as a school disciplinarian with any regard to my day-to day-duties. My job duties will, however, be used to explore interventions implemented that will hopefully influence the problem of practice. I can use my experience facilitating consultation with teachers and administrators, and serve as a student support. As an employee of the same school district of the research site, I am better able to navigate and obtain access to this particular school site.

I come to this research having past experiences with the problem of practice. While I have not directly experienced exclusionary discipline, nor have I worked in a position that assigned disciplinary punishment, I work directly with Black girls on a daily basis—particularly Black girls who often receive disciplinary consequences including suspension/expulsion. I

witness this problem of practice regularly, and the resulting frustration of Black girls who don't understand why they are being punished, do not agree with the punitive level of punishment, then become disengaged from school by means of exclusion. I have empathized with their frustration, questioned the practices our schools are using, and found myself wanting to advocate for alternatives to suspension and expulsion, particularly for the sake of our Black girls.

While these experiences have led me to this research, they may potentially impact my interpretation of findings. Given my discontent with discipline practices used with Black girls and desire for reform, I must be aware that I am not interpreting student and educator accounts through this lens. When analyzing data, I must be open to new themes that may emerge that may not align with my established perspective, or, may simply be different than my personal experiences. I also cannot make assumptions about the participants I interact with, simply because their experiences are similar to what I know (i.e. Black girls with a history of suspension/expulsion).

It is crucial for me to reflect on the fact that I come to this study as a White woman. This identity comes with many experiences and assumptions that must be considered. I have an understanding of what it means to be a girl in today's society and associated challenges— a hyper-focus on personal safety, unwanted sexual attention, assumed ignorance in certain settings. These are not uncommon for women in general. However, as discussed previously, gender and race intersect and yield a distinct identity with distinct experiences. Therefore, being White in addition to being a woman has allowed me privileges and particular experiences that are different from Black girls. I have not experienced racism or marginalization the way that Black girls may have. Challenges girls and women face may be experienced differently with the consideration of

race. So, it becomes especially important that I explore and understand details of their experiences so that I truly understand their thoughts and perceptions. I have no way of truly understanding the challenges Black girls may face, as I have never lived as a Black girl. I also cannot draw conclusions about their experiences based on my own—differing identities create differing realities. I assume a standpoint of ignorance at the outset of this research, so as not to make biased assumptions about the experiences being discussed.

Lastly, I come to this research with the assumption that there may be barriers along the way associated with my identity. There may be levels of distrust in confiding information related to race, when communication is happening across racial boundaries (Black girl to White woman). There may be power imbalances due to the differences in race, and also given my role in the school setting. Tieken (2013) discusses the internal struggle of positioning oneself in the field--not in literal terms, but in recognizing the dynamic way the researcher's identity and positionality impact research and data collection. I make a commitment to create an environment of comfort and confidence, to establish rapport with participants, and clearly communicate my intent to create positive change that benefits Black girls in schools.

I would be remiss if I did not admit that concerns have crossed my mind with this study. I have considered the question, "Can a White woman conduct research on a topic surrounding inequities for Black girls?" Many prominent researchers in this area are Black women themselves. Am I able to enter this arena when my experiences are so dissimilar? I am a part of the racial group that has created so many barriers and obstacles for the racial group I'm seeking to understand, no less. I've decided that the answer is yes, I can do this, and it is important for me to. It will require substantial reflection on my worldview and potential biases, realization of

how my racial identity may influence findings, and an unfailing commitment to allow participants to educate me on what I do not know, and what I need to know. I will use journaling techniques and notetaking to reflect on the research process and how my previous experiences may shape my interpretations. Given the majority of educators are also White and women, there is a need for alliances to be made across racial groups in education, and I hope that my work will accomplish just that.

Methods of Data Analysis

Interview data will be transcribed and then analyzed using a coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The coding process will be completed in two phases. During the first phase, I will only examine transcripts from interviews with Black girls. I will complete the coding and analyze their feedback first. This is done to maintain an approach in Critical Race Feminism, which prioritizes the need for understanding Black girls' experiences, and therefore, the findings from teacher interviews will not influence the interpretation of the girls'.

I will begin the coding process by reading all Black girls' interview transcripts to familiarize myself with the data and take notes on initial thoughts or ideas. Next, I will begin coding by assigning words or phrases with a code that represents a concept relevant to the research question. This process is *in vivo* coding, as it uses the actual words used by participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Codes will be developed using an emergent approach, and not predetermined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I will use data matrices to group similar codes together to identify themes that emerge (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). Last, I will group themes into overarching categories of findings.

The same process will be used with the second phase of coding for teacher interview transcripts. The only difference in the coding methodology is that the findings will be interpreted using the themes identified using data from interviews with Black girls. This was decided for two reasons. One, by using consistent codes across data sets, findings can be logically interpreted and organized. Second, using the themes from Black girls' experiences puts them at the forefront, and actively interprets teachers' accounts with Black girls in mind. Therefore, teachers' feedback is considered through a Critical Race Feminism lens.

To establish validity in the data analysis process, I will triangulate my findings between and within the two data sources. Triangulation will allow for consistencies and discrepancies to be determined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This will include identifying consistencies between participants' responses. To enhance the triangulation process, I will produce a thorough discussion of the findings from both interview data sources, which will help provide readers with a backdrop of where the research took place and its relevancy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I will also engage in reflexivity practices throughout the research process, and especially during the data analysis stage. This process will allow me to identify any potential biases that I may bear when looking at the data and results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An important component of data analysis for this will be maintaining notes regarding findings that are surprising or unanticipated, or contradict with my own beliefs or understanding of the problem. These notes and reflections will be kept separately from the actual findings, but will be an important incorporation to the overall interpretation of the results.

CHAPTER THREE

STUDENT INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Five Black girls attending Madison County Middle School were interviewed. Three of the girls were enrolled in the 7th grade, and 2 girls were in the 8th grade. All of the students interviewed attended this same school for the previous school year. All of the Black girls interviewed had previous history of disciplinary action, with varying degrees of experiences. Some girls had minor infractions, and others had multiple major referrals that resulted in out of school suspension. None of the girls interviewed were expelled or were arrested previously.

This section outlines the findings from individual interviews conducted with Black girls. Themes are presented in this section and organized into three overarching concepts: current practices and their implications, alternatives to current practices, and the potential positive outcomes due to changing current practices. In this overview, direct quotations from Black girls' responses to interview questions are embedded, in conjunction with an elaboration of the findings.

Current Practices and Implications

The first section of findings provides an overview of the current practices in place, Black girls' impressions, and the overall implications of approaches to discipline with Black girls currently in place. Overarching themes in this section include current practices and experiences, the emotional impact current practices have on Black girls, and the role poor relationships with adults play in their current experiences.

Current Practices and Experiences

This section outlines the themes that emerged directly related to specific experiences Black girls reporting having with the current discipline practices in place. These themes provide evidence of how participants' experiences mirror the findings of existing literature, surrounding stereotypes, differential treatment, and negative implications of exclusionary discipline. There is also a theme on negative social interactions among Black girls about fighting behavior related to discipline experiences.

The findings discussed in this section closely align with the experiences of Black girls outlined in existing research. This section provides essential evidence that participants' experiences are similar to Black girls in previous studies and many other Black girls in public schools. Therefore, recommendations for reform made by participants are likely to be a valid representation of the needs of Black girls outside of this site.

Stereotypes and Differential Treatment

Black girls identified multiple ways in which they felt they received differential treatment regarding behavior at school. First, girls identified general overarching methods of stereotyping. Erika was eager to share her knowledge and experiences with colorism—using the term specifically to describe her and other girls' experiences at school. She shared how Black girls with darker skin were perceived and treated differently than girls with lighter skin tones: "Dark-skinned girls, like myself, are ghetto and loud, and we don't speak properly. Or, we're just terrible people in general," Erika.

Stereotypes about Black girls in general—regardless of the darkness of skin—were also reported, such as feeling that they were perceived by others as disrespectful, always acting out, being bad, and having no self-control. One student repeatedly used a "good"/ "bad" dichotomy

and frequently referred to herself and her behavior as "bad," and consequently referred to White girls and their behavior as being "good." When asked about using those terms, she appeared embarrassed that she hadn't even noticed, reiterating how deeply these stereotypes are ingrained in girls' day-to-day perceptions.

Girls also reported feeling singled out in specific ways. They explained that dress code enforcement was unfair. They received warnings or referrals for dress code violations and observed White girls not receiving a consequence for the same offense. One participant also reported being singled out for her behavior when other students also engaged in the same behavior. Girls also felt that teachers punished them for insignificant behaviors that did not need reprimanding.

Negative Impact on School Performance and Functioning

Black girls also reported multiple ways in which current discipline practices impacted their success and access to opportunities at school. Girls shared that they felt that being disciplined has impacted their school performance, including a decline in grades. Girls also felt that their experiences with school discipline likely negatively impacted their future achievements, such as getting into specific colleges:

A lot of school things go on your record forever. So when you try to get into this perfect college, but you have fighting on this, or you fought over this, this, and this, and that's on your record forever, they're not going to choose you because you fight every other week.

– Erika

This quote outlines Black girls' awareness, even in middle school, of how their interaction with discipline will impact their future opportunities.

Other opportunities like participating in extracurricular activities such as sport teams were also directly impacted by their discipline history. Brittany shared how she worked hard to make the basketball team last school year, only for the opportunity to be taken away from her after multiple discipline infractions. Beyond achievements and extracurricular opportunities, another girl shared her experiences with even being denied access to use the restroom due to her previous interactions with a teacher regarding her behavior: “Since I skipped class a lot, they’ll probably be like, “No, you can’t use the bathroom,” Tierra. Her experience shows how Black girls' redundant punishment can result in teachers assuming the worst about them and their behavior and ultimately having basic needs denied. In this scenario, using the bathroom was a privilege that the teacher could take away if they felt her behavior wasn't acceptable.

Black girls interviewed also shared their perspectives on current practices and their limited effectiveness. Diamond shared her experience with in-school suspension:

...the students in the room really loud and anything could happen, 'cause they're not fully watching you. There could be a fight. [They] could be doing stuff they're not supposed to be doing. So I don't like that. The way they keep you in there all day, and you can't even ask questions or anything. I don't like that.

She expressed how exclusionary practices like in-school suspension do not directly benefit Black girls and put them in a setting that further promotes silencing them. Also, she recognized how the environment was detrimental to safety, with a lack of supervision and situations in which she felt uncomfortable.

Diamond shared that in-school suspension often resulted in social conflict since teachers wrote referrals for fighting or other altercations and then sent those same students to in-school suspension together. It only provided an environment for the situation to worsen between the students without an opportunity for resolution. She also shared that while in in-school suspension, she was likely to be punished for things while in there, making the situation even worse: “The part where if you say a word, you get written up again. I don’t like that either... you just getting that student in more trouble and making the chances of them getting sent home bigger,” Diamond. Her shared experience indicates that in-school suspension may create an unfortunate opportunity to receive punishment again, creating a snowball effect with exclusion.

Lastly, Tierra shared an experienced phenomenon where if she is disciplined, she'll be more likely to receive harsher punishment in the future for additional infractions: “Since I was bad during school, they’ll make it harder on me. Like, “Oh, she need to get something worse because she always being bad.” Tierra explains how instead of seeing a pattern in infractions and thinking critically about the situation, adults gave her a harder time as if trying to “punish the behavior away.” Tierra went on to share how adults who did not even play a role in discipline, like front office staff, would make comments about the repetitive discipline, such as, “You're up here [in the office] again? What did you do now?” In this sense, the exclusion Black girls face is physical, as well as social and emotional. Adults create predetermined notions about their behavior, dole out harsher punishments, and assume the worst about their presence in the school building.

With this, a theme emerges about the pattern of discipline with Black girls, where there is a “repeat offender” phenomenon of receiving more and harsher punishment based on one's

previous discipline record. An unfortunate consequence is the normalization of exclusion, which was apparent in Erika's account. When asked about the types of discipline she experienced, she shared: "It's probably small things like I get OSS (out of school suspension) for 2, 3 days, and then I'll be back and it's like none of it happened," Erika. It is clear that school discipline has conditioned Erika to believe that being excluded from school is an appropriate consequence, which she now views as a "small thing." Another concern emerges that adults forget about the behavior quickly, even though it caused lost instruction and disengagement from school. While teachers should not hold grudges, this is telling that the behavior may not have warranted the severe punishment since it is forgotten easily upon returning.

Negative Social Interactions among Black Girls

A final theme that emerged during interviews reflected negative social interactions among Black girls, including drama, gossiping, rumors, and physical fighting. While immediately this theme does not appear relevant to the experiences of Black girls related to school discipline, and potentially a more socially problematic concept, the Black girls interviewed commonly reported suspensions from school for fighting, and school-level data substantiates this. Therefore, fighting relates to the likelihood of a Black girl being removed from school and deserves consideration when reforming discipline practices. Every Black girl interviewed shared involvement with fighting and its impact on their discipline experiences. One girl shared her observations of social interactions among Black girls: "They'll [Black girls] spread rumors. They'll start drama with people for no reason. If you're minding your business and they don't like that, they will try to fight you," Diamond.

This finding is not a criticism of Black girls' social behavior. Instead, social conflict among Black girls is a factor that may be beneficial to address when considering new approaches to discipline. Not only will this impact school discipline, but it can increase the physical safety of Black girls, prevent the likelihood of situations escalating to the point of fighting, and allow Black girls the opportunity to problem-solve in alternative ways. During interviews, girls provided examples of miscommunication between Black girls resulting in physical altercations, ultimately resulting in out-of-school suspension. One girl also reported feeling the need to become physically aggressive to protect family and friends. Thus, a need for social conflict remediation is a need to consider regarding preventative discipline practices. Black girls provided thorough insight into the current treatment they face in schools and negative experiences surrounding discipline. Girls shared how they experienced stereotypes surrounding their race and gender regularly, including feeling that adults perceived them and their behaviors differently than other students. This theme encompasses a wide range of treatment, ranging from differential enforcement of the dress code to being denied access to fundamental rights such as using the restroom. Girls shared accounts of a "repeat offender" phenomenon, in which girls who already had previous discipline infractions were more likely to receive a harsher punishment in the future. It is not surprising that Black girls identified adverse outcomes as a result, including a decline in grades, a potential negative impact on their future, and being unable to participate in extracurricular activities.

Lastly, Black girls shared the negativity surrounding social interactions among Black girls, which often resulted in exclusion from school. These themes demonstrate how necessary interrupting the cycle of mistreatment and punishment is. If no change occurs, teachers will

continue to view Black girls' behavior through a stereotyped lens, and Black girls will continue to be punished repeatedly for their behavior. The result is additional adverse outcomes and a continuation of social conflict. To fully understand the impact current practices have on Black girls, particularly from their perspective, it is necessary to understand the emotional toll discipline has on them. The following section takes a deeper dive into the experiences of Black girls and identifies themes related to the emotional impact current discipline practices have on them.

Emotional Impact on Black Girls

In addition to stereotypes and specific experiences, themes also emerged regarding internal, social, and emotional challenges Black girls face due to current discipline practices. These themes are discussed separately from the previous findings, as they are specific to the internal, emotional well-being of Black girls. There are obvious negative implications of exclusionary discipline, such as lost instructional time. However, the themes discussed in this section provide crucial insight into how current practices negatively impact black girls' emotional well-being. These findings outline how Black girls interviewed have experienced an emotional impact, social and emotional isolation, personal stressors, and internal conflict.

Emotional Factors and Impact

During interviews, Black girls identified how school discipline negatively impacted their emotional well-being. Girls frequently shared their difficulty with anger control as a factor in their negative interactions with teachers. Brittany expressed how her challenges with managing anger influenced her behavior. Teachers' approach to her

behavior often triggered an anger response: “I have anger issues. So if you yell in my face, I’m going to say something, yell back, and be mad disrespectful,” Brittany.

Tierra also shared how teachers’ responses triggered anger in her:

I feel like I get too angry, and that's when I start to act up... So if a teacher gets mad at me for what I’m doing, then I’ll start to get mad and frustrated and not do what I’m supposed to do.

Girls identified as having a hard time managing their anger, and that adults viewed their behavior as 'disrespectful' as a result. In one way, Black girls' behavior is reflective of the teachers: if they yell, she is going to yell; if their approach is hostile, her response might be hostile. Therefore, it's important to consider the role that teacher response plays. Further, considering the stereotypes Black girls are up against, one could interpret Black girls' behavior as a protective or defensive response. While these girls share how their response was in anger, we can't blame them for poor anger management when the adult did not set the stage for her to respond positively.

Brittany also shared how she felt like her emotions were difficult to regulate: “I know I can control it, but it’s hard to control. I feel like I can, but I can’t. And I just know that we all, as Black girls, have attitude problems, as everyone says.” Her reflection captures the confusion Black girls experience with emotional control and self-regulation and how she knows she can control her emotions but seemingly can't when put in these scenarios with adults at school. By citing the "attitude problem" Black girls supposedly have, it seems Brittany has internalized the stereotype so much that she believes that it truly is the reason behind her behavior and response. There is an internal struggle of

feeling a lack of control, which is influenced by realizing that others have a preconceived notion that she has an attitude problem.

Beyond experiencing difficulty and confusion around emotional control, Black girls explained how they felt socially and emotionally isolated at school. Aurianna shared feelings of exclusion and being unwanted at school: “The teachers and principals just didn’t like me all day, and they didn’t want me to come to school. That’s why they always suspend me.”

Aurianna's experience demonstrates how exclusionary discipline sends Black girls the message that adults do not want them at school and dislike them. Additionally, whatever the perceived purpose behind suspending her was, the reasoning was meaningless to this student. The only takeaway was that adults did not want her at school and that her teachers didn't like her. Most importantly, practices that make Black girls feel unwanted and not valued are damaging to their emotional well-being, and schools should prioritize alternative approaches.

Personal Stressors

Girls also explained how their emotional challenges are made worse by personal stressors. Erika expressed how her actions were not what they might have appeared to be on the surface: "I was going through something that I didn't really know how to speak about, or wanted to tell somebody, but didn't know how. So I used actions and sometimes I act out about it.” In this example, she knew that she was experiencing emotional stress but lacked the skill set to cope appropriately. It's also important to note that she *wanted* to tell someone but didn't know how to go about doing that. Her story cites the need for positive adult relationships, which I discuss in a later section.

Aurianna also shared how behavior could be a manifestation of other things going on in their lives: “Some people don’t get in trouble to get in trouble. Some people have things going on in life and they get in trouble, but they don’t mean to. They just having difficult times.” Erika explained how home life, such as family conflict and poverty, were stressors students brought to school with them: “A lot of kids who act out, it has something to do with what’s going on at home. Some kids come to school to get away from home. So I feel like sending that kid home is just making it worse sometimes.”

Further, Erika's explanation shows how exclusionary discipline exacerbates existing challenges students face and is crucial in understanding how societal and personal stressors influence Black girls' behavior at school. Current practices lack direct benefit and worsen the stress that Black girls are already experiencing outside of school. It becomes clear that schools should restructure discipline to address and alleviate the stress of Black girls instead of compounding it.

Internal Conflict

The final theme that emerged regarding Black girls' emotional functioning is a sense of internal conflict. Girls shared feelings of guilt, first about hostile interactions with adults: "I don't even like arguing with the teacher. I mean, it seem like I do it a lot, but I really don't like talking back to somebody because then I be feeling guilty after it," Tierra. She shares how teachers misinterpret her behavior— that while it may appear that she enjoys engaging in behaviors such as talking back, there is personal turmoil surrounding it. Her experience further supports that observed behaviors of Black girls cannot be taken at face value or viewed as being disrespectful. Instead, this shows a need to reframe and rethink Black girls' behavior as a method of self-

preservation or a defense mechanism in response to inadequate adult response. Tierra went on to explain further: "When a teacher yell at me, Imma say something back because I be mad. But then sometimes I don't be wanting to say nothing back because I be like, "Man, they just told me. What I'm going to do?"

Tierra's shared experience demonstrates internal conflict. Black girls emotionally struggle when involved with disciplinary action at school, and the cycle of anger explained earlier. The teacher's approach (yelling) triggered an anger response, accompanied by mixed feelings of responding. Her story also demonstrates the pattern or cycle of negative interactions with teachers by realizing that this is not the first experience ("they just told me") and then having feelings of regret ("What I'm going to do?"). Lastly, this final statement shows her sense of hopelessness, as if at a dead end with no other options than the ones she has already tried. Tierra finally shares how this cycle of negative interaction has an impact on both the adults and herself: "And that got me feeling bad. Because Imma give these people a hard time and I'm giving myself a hard time too."

It's notable that despite her adverse experiences, she still demonstrates empathy for the adults by feeling that she's giving them a "hard time." There is also a sense that she's harming her own well-being and creating challenges for herself. This finding further demonstrates the frustration and confusion Black girls experience with school discipline experiences, with perceptions clouded by being made to feel that being disciplined is their responsibility when the adult is likely also playing a vital role in the outcome. I discuss this in detail in the following section on themes related to student/teacher relationships with Black girls and their educators.

In summary, these themes demonstrate the negative impact current discipline practices have on Black girls' emotional functioning. These themes shed light on the challenges Black girls experience with anger control, particularly in response to adult behavior and response. Further, what adults consider anger or attitude problems may genuinely be a defense response when provoked. Girls identified how personal stressors influence behavior at school and how, unfortunately, current practices isolate them and worsen the turmoil they are already experiencing. Unsurprisingly, these emotional stressors result in internal conflict and debate, as Black girls get caught between how they want and feel they should respond versus how it will be perceived and the likely outcome. These considerations of emotional impact not only substantiate the need for reform but should be taken into consideration when determining the appropriateness and needs addressed by alternative practices.

Black Girls' Relationships with Teachers

This final section on current practices outlines the challenges Black girls experience with teacher relationships. Participants identified how their teachers' relationships with them felt damaged and unsupportive and often included poor communication. Girls explained how these negative relationships resulted in disengagement and patterns of negative interaction and discipline. An additional theme also emerged on how teacher stereotypes negatively influence these relationships. These findings are crucial when identifying a starting point for reform that directly affects how educators address discipline.

Poor Relationships and Poor Communication

Black girls' experiences with current discipline practices were heavily dependent on the quality of the relationship they had with their teachers. Tierra shared how she perceived teachers'

feelings toward her: “I know they would feel some type of way about me because the way I was acting. And it didn’t seem like they wanted to be around me too much.”

Tierra experienced social isolation from adults due to their attitude toward her behavior. As explained earlier, current practices isolate Black girls from schools, including social connection with their teachers. Her experience is like Aurianna's, who felt disliked by adults at school. Erika shared how previously, adults' interactions with her weren't even close to what she needed:

"Really all I wanted was someone to talk to me. They end up giving me a referral for something, and all I needed was somebody to talk to me.” Here, she identifies what her needs were (adult support). Instead, the adult punished her— an unfortunately perfect example of how adults meet Black girls' needs with discipline instead of empathy and connection— two critical components of positive student-teacher relationships. That theme is discussed in greater detail later.

Diamond continued to share how having a teacher talk to her would be a beneficial alternative to what she’s experienced: “...they just write you up automatically instead of actually talking to you. Instead of sitting you down and telling you, “You got one more chance to do this.” They just automatically do it and not even talk to you about it.”

These girls' experiences indicate a need for conversation between Black girls and their teachers that they are not currently receiving. This practice would be a beneficial alternative to automatically writing a referral, which is discussed further in the next section.

However, this is not to say that teachers do not address or speak with Black girls. On the contrary, the component most frequently discussed related to relationships with teachers was poor communication, or how adults and teachers address black girls. Brittany shared how teachers' approach to communication was often combative and argumentative: "I try not to be

disrespectful to teachers because they the one giving me my education. But at the end of the day, don't yell at my face. Don't talk to me sideways."

Brittany's experience shows the lack of mutual respect teachers demonstrate. Their approach to speaking wouldn't be acceptable for the student, so how is it appropriate for the adult to speak that way? This example is further evidence of Black girls' behavior being in response to negative teacher interactions. Tierra shares similar feelings about how adults speak to her: "They'll yell at me, and I don't like getting yelled at. When somebody yell at me, I be feeling offended like, "I can't yell at you."

In addition to feeling offended, Tierra shares a sense of helplessness due to not being able to address adults the way that adults speak to her. She also shared how the teacher triggered her emotions, and responses escalated due to the teacher's approach to addressing a situation: "They yelling at me and making me feel bad. If I get mad then I will start being mean, too," Tierra.

Brittany also shared how teachers interrupting her conversations, or perceptions of such, were also reflective of lack of mutual respect: "You [the teacher] don't even know what's going on, and you [the teacher] just butt into the conversation. That's disrespectful. So I'm going to be disrespectful, too."

Her experience shows how the teacher's approach to addressing student behavior, talking to peers is critical in whether or not a Black girl will feel the need to defend herself through her actions. Further, Tierra explained how her relationship with a teacher was damaged due to this type of interaction and caused her to have feelings of resentment: "I still be holding that grudge because you [the teacher] were just mean to me."

In summary, an exchange between a teacher and a Black girl carries more weight than just the conversation at hand. Black girls identify with mirroring adult communication patterns, such as yelling and being mean and not being able to move on from those situations right away.

Disengagement Due to Negative Relationships

With teachers facilitating such poor communication, it's unsurprising that Black girls also reported disengaging from learning and school due to these negative interactions with their teachers. Tierra shared how a teacher's response led her to give up on trying to engage: "...the teacher would be so hard on us. We just be like, "We might as well not even listen." She also explained how a pattern over time eventually led to anticipating negative interactions with the teacher, resulting in skipping or avoiding class:

I still would have went to class, but I was frustrated. And then if I went to class, something probably badder was going to happen. I feel like me, and the teacher would have been arguing instead of me just not coming to class, and they just giving me a referral. – Tierra

In this example, Tierra ultimately chose to skip class instead of going to that teacher's class. Given her previous interactions with the teacher, she knew that there was a good chance that there would be an argument between them, which would have a worse outcome for her than just taking a referral for skipping class. She made a conscious choice to get a referral for something else that allowed her to avoid interacting with the teacher altogether– essentially opting for the lesser of two punishments and to avoid the negative interaction. Her experience is an unfortunate example of how poor relationships with teachers impact disciplinary action, engagement, and learning participation.

Negative Stereotypes

The last section of themes that contribute to poor relationships between Black girls and their educators are the negative stereotypes adults have about them. It is well established in available research that stereotypes contribute to perceptions of Black girls' behavior. The current findings further substantiate this concept and provide evidence that this sample of Black girls' experiences is similar to previous research. Thus, the findings and recommendations made based on this will hopefully benefit Black girls across many geographic areas. Negative stereotypes play a detrimental role in the relationships teachers have with Black girls, which schools must consider when planning for appropriate reform methods.

When asked about how teachers viewed her, Tierra immediately identified how teachers had perceptions that she is bad: “Some teachers kind of look at me like, “Oh, she that bad girl,” because I’m always doing bad stuff.”

Erika even referred to teachers' perceptions about their behavior as lack of self-control: "It's a stereotype that all of us [Black girls] act out, and we're bad, and we have no self-training". Here, she interestingly words it as "self-training," possibly making a subtle reference to girls being wild or untamed—words associated with animal behaviors, which is consistent with other findings of the stereotypes Black women face in society.

Last, Diamond shared how teachers often made assumptions about her behavior: "They [teachers] do assume that they [Black girls] fight or talk back. They'll [teachers] assume you're skipping class if they see you in the hallway, or being in a fight, or something like that." Her experiences indicate that normal daily behaviors, as simple as walking in the hall, are subjected to teacher assumptions that there is a maladaptive purpose behind it, such as skipping class or

meeting up to fight with someone. Other girls shared how they felt that administrators and school resource officers watched them more often than other students, which is consistent with existing research on the policing and over surveillance of Black girls in schools. These themes demonstrate the awareness Black girls have of teacher perceptions of them and serve as a significant barrier in adults having positive, empathetic relationships with Black girls in schools.

This section describes the themes that emerged regarding Black girls' relationships with their teachers and other adults at school. Negative interactions, poor communication, and stereotypes contribute to how these relationships impact Black girls' experiences with school and discipline. Disengagement, school avoidance, and feelings of being disliked or unwanted are just a few examples of how negative adult relationships manifest in Black girls' lives. Adults do not give Black girls opportunities to talk about their behavior and do not demonstrate mutual respect, but still demand respect from Black girls in return. In summary, these themes support a clear need for intervention to improve the experiences of Black girls in schools concerning discipline practices. In the next section, I discuss recommendations for change. It is not surprising that many of these themes directly correlate with the interpersonal needs between Black girls and their teachers.

Alternatives to Current Practices

This next section outlines the themes that emerged regarding specific alternative practices to use instead of exclusionary discipline. I asked Black girls how they wish behavior were handled in their school instead of the experiences already discussed. Girls who were able to identify positive relationships or interactions with adults, specifically related to their behavior,

were asked to give specific examples of how adults addressed them and their behavior that was beneficial. I asked girls who had particularly negative experiences how they wished adults had handled situations instead.

Given the needs identified in the previous section on student-teacher relationships, it is unsurprising that most of the recommendations identified pertain to improving relationships between teachers and Black girls. These recommendations include improving the communication strategies used with them. This discussion also contains additional themes on culturally responsive practices.

Improve Relationships between Black Girls and Teachers

Every Black girl interviewed identified ways in which adults and teachers could improve relationships with them. Girls identified specific ways in which teachers could foster more positive relationships with them. Thus, themes emerged surrounding the need for improvement in student-teacher relationships. Girls often conveyed this by providing positive examples of teacher interactions that were beneficial to them. When discussing a helpful teacher relationship, Erika shared how the teacher demonstrated empathy: "She'll [the teacher] find a way to make me feel like it's okay, and you can fix this," Erika.

Her experience shows that Black girls need their experiences validated by adults and adults to ensure that the current situation is temporary and changeable.

Diamond also shared her experience with an effective adult relationship. She explained how the teacher held her accountable while maintaining a positive approach, tone, and outcome:

She talks to me about stuff. She talks to me, and she's calmly saying it and let me know that it is okay, but I need to get myself together and try a bit harder. And

she tries to give me things that I can do to improve and help me out. So that's how I have a strong relationship with her.

Like Erika, Diamond benefitted from a teacher maintaining a calm approach while identifying what to work on and providing help. Black girls need adults who offer reassurance that their situation is not permanent while also communicating their support. Establishing effective relationships between teachers and Black girls stems from empathy. When asked about how she would like for adults to interact with her and other Black girls, Diamond shared what she needed: "Have someone come over and just have a personal conversation with them and let them know that things are okay. And like, try to help them improve [themselves] instead of making the mistakes they already did," Diamond.

She explains how an intentional conversation helps move away from putting Black girls down for their actions and behaviors and instead become discussions surrounding positive outcomes. Erika expanded on this idea, giving specific ways she wished adults had conversations with her:

No one's ever said, "Hey, maybe you shouldn't do this because that's just making the stereotype real." Mostly people being like, "Why do you have to be like this?" "Why do you do this, this, this, and this?" When people are like, "Why can't you say that right?" or "Why can't you do that right?" it's like, I'm sorry I didn't know.

Her explanation shows the importance of reframing conversations that don't blame Black girls for their behavior and instead have adults explain their thinking or reasoning. When asked to describe positive adult interactions, Aurianna shared how the adult demonstrating mutual respect

was important to her: "They [teachers] interact with me good. They speak to me. They speak to me like I'm a grown adult. I respect them, they respect me."

For Aurianna, how the adult addressed her played a crucial role in her perceptions of the relationship. She was able to recognize when respect was demonstrated to her, which led to her respecting them. How the interaction between adults and Black girls looks and feels to them and how teachers can further accomplish mutual respect through effective communication is discussed further in the following section.

Aurianna also shared how having a personal relationship with a teacher was beneficial for Black girls: "Just like having conversations or understanding them [Black girls], or understanding why they do certain things," Aurianna.

Similarly, Erika explained how effective teachers facilitated engagement by getting to know her: "They [teachers] get to know the student. We like to crack jokes and have fun, and she doesn't see it as a distraction. She kind of uses it to help us to actually participate," Erika. Given the previous theme of Black girls' disengagement from school due to discipline, this counter theme of academic engagement being promoted and encouraged through personal relationships with adults is a crucial finding when considering recommendations for change.

Overall, girls felt that teachers having conversations with them both socially and personally about their behavior positively impacted their experiences. Additionally, a teacher using student qualities to benefit her academic experience is an excellent example of how getting to know Black girls and their needs and interests can increase engagement and promote culturally responsive practices, versus exclusion which accomplishes the opposite.

Last, Diamond discussed her need for adults to have an empathetic perspective of her behavior:

I'm not a bad person. I do make mistakes sometimes, but I'm not a terrible person. I don't do these things for attention or for fun, I just made that one mistake, and I hope that it doesn't affect the way you look at me. And for the other girls, I think it'd be the same way. They do make mistakes. And I think that they will want them to not think that they're just this terrible person who doesn't do anything right.

Here, Diamond hopes for forgiveness for mistakes instead— a key theme in this section on empathetic approaches to discipline.

Improve Communication between Adults and Black Girls

Effective communication is vital in the success of any relationship, and the interactions between educators and Black girls are no exception. Improving how adults communicate with Black girls is a notable finding. As girls identified specific ways they would like adults to speak to them and address their behavior, this theme emerged.

All Black girls interviewed shared how communicating or talking with them about their behavior was a more beneficial intervention than punitive discipline. Erika shares how talking to Black girls and getting their perspective is essential: "Just talk to them [Black girls]. Ask, "Why would you do this? What made you think this was okay?"

Additionally, girls shared how these conversations made it so that teachers understood the “why” behind the behavior, instead of making automatic assumptions:

“Let the whole story get out on their side about the situation and not automatically

assuming and just writing them up. Let them [Black girls] actually tell what happened. Believe them for what they say,” Diamond. Diamond's feedback contains a crucial point of letting Black girls have a voice in school discipline. They need to be able to voice their concerns and perspective and be met with validation and belief.

Lastly, Erika explained how taking a supportive approach can make a difference as well:

They [teachers] say, "Hey, you want to talk about it?" or, "Hey, what's the issue? Why do you look like that? Why are you acting like this today? You're not acting like you today." They ask questions, and that's all most kids want is an adult to ask questions.

It's notable how framing questions in an empathetic way is a crucial shift in how educators handle discipline with Black girls. In addition to hearing their side of the story, it also allows teachers to understand their needs and emotions: "...to see how we really is, instead of how we act,” Tierra

Last, Diamond explained the importance of how teachers spoke with her: "Just pull me aside and calmly tell me, not yell, but calmly talk to me and tell me what I'm doing wrong.” Here, she describes how the teacher's approach— remaining calm and not yelling— can set a positive tone for a productive conversation. This recommendation is important, given that girls explained how a teacher's tone influences their response, such as meeting anger with anger or verbal aggression with verbal aggression. A calm approach can also better meet the emotional needs of Black girls by conveying a more emotionally supportive stance.

Improving adult communication with Black girls was a central theme identified throughout student interviews. Adults' approaches to interacting with Black girls include yelling

and putting them down for their behavior. Instead, girls identify needing more empathetic approaches to conversations, and having adults work toward understanding the "why" behind behavior versus jumping to conclusions and punishment

Support Specific for Black Girls

A theme also emerged about ways schools can provide support that is intentional in benefitting Black girls specifically. Brittany shared her idea of a group for Black girls specifically:

An activity that we can do, just us [Black girls] and not everybody. Because sometimes we [Black girls] feel like it's a privilege. White people, they can do anything. They can get anything. But us Black girls, we got to sit back and watch them do these things... We just need an all-Black girls program. Something that can help us release, make us feel good.

She explains how groups are usually inaccessible to Black girls, therefore making one exclusively available to them could promote pride among Black girls. It can also be an opportunity for Black girls to have positive social interactions and promote emotional wellness. Diamond also had this idea but saw it as a way for Black girls with a history of discipline to come together: "Start a little club thing for the Black girls that act up or things to just help them and talk to them about it."

It's interesting to note that Diamond also described how the school previously had a program, and students asked to participate mainly were Black girls. When asked about details, she shared that it was actually for students who received a high number of referrals and

attempted to intervene with these students. While she described overall positive feelings about the group, she explained that the school did not explicitly design it for Black girls. It just so happened to end up being all Black girls who attended since they received referrals and suspension most frequently. While the concept indeed had good intentions, the result was framing support for "trouble makers," which just so happened to be all Black girls. The failed attempt at reform ultimately conveyed that Black girls and their behavior require intervention to conform to expectations.

Brittany continued to explain how this program could directly benefit Black girls: "If we had group sessions where we could talk to each other and feel each other's pain." The group would offer an opportunity for Black girls to come together and support one another emotionally, which Diamond also thought was necessary: "We could talk about problems to each other if we need to."

Cultivating shared experiences is essential when addressing Black girls' needs in schools through a Critical Race Feminism framework. Since Black girls' experiences are unique to their gender and race, creating opportunities and space for them to share experiences and emotions is essential. Erika describes this realization:

I think we should [stick together] because we already have the world against us. Because not only are we Black, but we're women. So we're two different things that's been pushed and beaten and put against each other for so long. So if we're Black and women, why can't we stick together? Why do we also have to fight? That's just making everything worse. Because from the other eye, they're like,

“How y’all want us to respect you when you can’t even respect each other?” So I think we should probably fix that.

As discussed previously, Black girls in this study experience social stress and conflict with one another, specifically with physical fighting. Erika described this strategy as one that provides a safe space for Black girls to come together and foster positive relationships.

Groups and programs are a privilege to which most White students have access. Black girls expressed that schools should consider developing programs specifically for them. A program would provide Black girls an opportunity to relate to one another, share experiences, and empower one another. This program must be implemented intentionally and done proactively instead of being developed for repeatedly disciplined girls. By reframing it as an opportunity for all Black girls, this group becomes a right they are entitled to, as opposed to being a requirement to attend as a form of behavior intervention. The following section reviews a few final themes about other considerations to adequately support Black girls in schools.

Other Considerations

A few additional themes for school discipline reform also emerged. Regarding the concept of social conflict among Black girls being an area in need of support, Erika shared ways that teachers could support her and other Black girls to avoid escalation in these situations:

Even if the adult was just sitting in the middle and only the kids are talking. Just keep them from arguing or even getting close enough to touch each other. Let one tell their side of the story, and the other tell their side of the story.

This insight from Erika is reflective of restorative practices, in which an adult facilitates the conversation between two students who are engaging in conflict.

Diamond shared how providing warnings would be beneficial for her: “Tell [me], “If you keep doing this, I’m going to call your parents or write you up,” and not just do it without even giving the student a warning.”

And lastly, Erika explained an approach that would support Black girls’ emotional wellness:

Just give us a little time, like probably in the morning and then in the middle of the day, where we could just sit and breathe. Because some of us are all the way stressed, and we just need that time to just breathe and take in what's going on.

Given the emotional needs of Black girls and other stressors outside of school many face, providing an opportunity like Erika described to pause, reflect, and breathe, could be a simple way to meet their needs better.

In summary, Black girls identified numerous ways adults could address them and their behavior to replace current practices. Girls shared how they need supportive relationships with teachers who use empathetic communication to help redirect situations and even potentially resolve conflict among peers. By improving how adults interact with Black girls, many positive outcomes for Black girls are likely. I discuss the potential impact of these recommendations in the next section.

Positive Outcomes

This final section of themes that emerged from interviews with Black girls is about the positive impact of making changes to school discipline practices for Black girls. I asked girls what their school experience would be like if their challenges with school discipline disappeared, what that would look like, and how it would positively impact them. Girls shared how their

emotional functioning would improve, how adults could establish positive relationships with them, and how these changes would improve their overall experiences with school.

Improved Social/Emotional Functioning

First, themes surrounding a benefit to Black girls' emotional well-being emerged. This concept is not surprising given the substantial negative emotional impact that current practices have on Black girls. Brittany readily shared how changing current practices would alleviate stress and worry in her life:

We don't have to worry about a teacher dress coding us for having no tights with a skirt. We don't got to deal with a teacher yelling at us because we got on jogger pants. That would be so helpful... I don't got to go home feeling stressed every day. If this changed today, tomorrow, sometime in the future—I feel like I can do anything.

Here, Brittany identifies a range of emotional benefits that could occur. First, a day-to-day impact of not having to worry about dress code violations. Then on a grander scale, it would decrease overall stress and increase feelings of self-confidence. One can see the magnitude of impact improving discipline practices can have for Black girls.

She also shared how these changes would improve her sense of self: "If the situation changed, I'd be a better person. I'd feel so much better than what I do now," Brittany. Her experience conveys how current practices are detrimental to Black girls. Beyond feeling better about herself, Brittany identified that she would be a better person because of it. This idea makes sense, given Black girls are caught in a cycle of guilt, anger, and frustration due to adults addressing their behavior in such a negative way.

And last, Erika shared how having empathetic adults would allow her and other Black girls to be more vulnerable with their emotions: “Children actually have feelings. We go through things. We get depressed sometimes. We don’t feel the best sometimes. So I feel like it would actually make them [us] open up more,” Erika.

By fostering positive relationships and improving communication within these relationships, teachers can positively impact Black girls' emotional well-being. Girls also shared how their relationships with teachers would benefit, which I discuss next.

Positive Relationships and Increased Engagement

When asked how she would know her experiences with school discipline were improved, Tierra said improved relationships with her teachers would be a strong indicator: "I probably would have a better connection with the teacher than what I had," Tierra. The word "connection" is a keyword here. Her reflection shows how previous interactions made her feel disconnected, and how in contrast, changes would make her feel like effective communication improved the relationship. Additionally, Diamond shared that these changes would show that adults were forgiving but also would hold her accountable as needed:

That would make me feel like they understand me more, or they just understand sometimes people do act up and make mistakes, and that's okay. But you have to improve them. And it makes me feel like I can trust them a bit more.

Trust is also noteworthy here, as this is crucial to meaningful relationships between students and adults. Brittany shared how these practices could lead to developing a connection between Black girls and their teachers:

Because now they can feel how we feel sometimes. Get into our head by relating to what we talking about and how we react. That's what my ELA teacher do. She relates stories to our lives, and I like that, because she listens to what we got to say.

Brittany shared how this teacher, particularly, was able to empathize with her and then take that knowledge and structure classroom content around it. This strategy is a great way to increase student engagement, which Erika explained would be the result of improving student-teacher relationships: "When I'm here [at school] and I'm around teachers that actually care, then I enjoy school," Erika. Not only did she identify how having compassionate teachers led to her enjoying school, but she also explained how her perceptions of teachers also changed:

This concept of demonstrating genuine concern for Black girls' well-being is a crucial component of most of the findings discussed in the recommendations for change.

Conclusion

This section outlines the findings from individual interviews conducted with Black girls. Based on the girls' stories and experiences, themes emerged surrounding their current experiences, recommendations for change based on their needs, and positive outcomes they would experience due to these changes. Current experiences included themes surrounding Black girls' behavior being "bad," other negative stereotypes, and poor educational and personal outcomes, many of which are already well-established in current literature. These findings provide evidence that the girls interviewed have similar experiences to other Black girls' samples in previous studies and those in the general population. Themes also emerged regarding the emotional impact current practices have on Black girls and the negative relationships and

interactions Black girls experience with teachers and other adults. These findings reiterate the importance of and need for reform.

Findings also portrayed promising themes regarding alternative practices. These findings are particularly salient given that they are generated by Black girls, for Black girls. These included improving teacher-student relationships between Black girls and their educators, specifically by demonstrating empathy, validating their experiences, and offering support instead of defaulting to punishment. Black girls also shared the need for improved communication from adults. They expressed needing a calm, inquiring approach that does not place blame on them or their actions. Having private conversations that are constructive instead of combative is crucial. Additionally, a supportive group exclusive to Black girls was discussed as an effective option to consider and other themes that would provide social and emotional support.

Black girls readily identified ways in which discipline reform would change their experiences at school. Black girls shared potential indicators of positive outcomes, including feelings of stress relief, empowerment, and increased engagement. Girls also explained how their relationship with teachers would improve due to current practices changing, which makes sense given the recommendations for teacher relationships and communication improvement.

This section provides a detailed description of current practices and their impact and subsequent recommendations and potential outcomes, based on the ideas and experiences of Black girls themselves. The following section explores these same concepts from the viewpoint of teachers.

CHAPTER FOUR

TEACHER INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Four teachers at Madison County Middle School were interviewed. Two teachers taught 7th grade, and 2 teachers taught 8th grade. Teachers taught a variety of subjects including English language arts, math, and history. One teacher was also a baseball coach, and another was also a theatre teacher. Teachers' number of years of experience in the classroom ranged from 2 years to over 20 years of teaching. All of the teachers interviewed taught at Madison County Middle School the previous school year, and shared having direct experiences working with Black girls.

The following section is an overview of themes based on teacher interviews. The purpose of data from teacher interviews was to obtain insight from educators' perspectives about the problem of practices, and potential approaches to interventions. In order to prioritize the findings from interviews with Black girls and critically examine any biases of educators, teacher interview findings are discussed as a separate section. I used the overarching thematic categories identified from interviews with Black girls as the basis for interpreting teacher interview data. This allowed data interpretation to center around the primary themes from Black girls' voices. The thematic categories discussed include current practices and beliefs, practices to consider replicating, and potential positive outcomes.

Current Practices and Beliefs

This section outlines themes surrounding the current practices teachers endorse either using or witnessing. Beliefs surrounding Black girls' behavior are also included in this section. Themes include the use of exclusion, stereotypes surrounding Black girls' behavior, the use of exclusion and its ineffectiveness, and negative interactions between teachers and Black girls.

Stereotypes about Black Girls' Behavior

The first finding that emerged encompassed biases and stereotypes teachers hold about Black girls and their behavior. I asked teachers to talk about the behaviors Black girls demonstrate that typically result in discipline. Some shared nuanced stereotypes, such as verbal aggression and having an attitude problem. I did not ask teachers to identify stereotypes specifically, however, one teacher in particular, Ms. Williamson, discussed behaviors from a seemingly biased perspective. Ms. Williamson provided multiple behaviors she observed Black girls demonstrating, including:

Sucking teeth, eye-rolling, flapping their hand at you, cross their legs, shake their legs really hard when they're aggravated with you, cuss you out... they'll get up and walk out of a room. [Say] "You don't tell me what to do."

Ms. Williamson's account shows how teachers may view behaviors from a biased standpoint, which is consistent with extensive literature available (Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016).

Additionally, her experiences shows how teachers may fail to realize how Black girls' behavior may be a product of adult responses, as she says, "when they're aggravated with you." This conveys an emotional response to how an adult interacted with them. However, the teacher did not recognize that the Black girl was in distress, and instead focused on the seemingly inappropriate behaviors masking it.

This theme is consistent with Black girls sharing how they felt teachers often made assumptions about behavior, such as Tierra sharing how teachers assumed she was trying to be bad due to her behavior. Stereotypes were also present in Ms. Williamson's assessment of necessary behavioral interventions for Black girls:

They [Black girls] just need some kind of like... etiquette class. How you behave this way in this situation, and this way in this situation. Yeah, there's a time you can let your hair down, but there's also a time you have to pin it up and act like a lady.

While Ms. Williamson's response is extreme, it is an unfortunate example of a mindset that teachers maintain. This stance aligns with the literature on their oppression, where society pushes Black girls to conform to White standards of behavior in order to be ladylike (Morris, 2007; Wun, 2016). Erika's feedback aligns with this as well: "...it's a stereotype that all of us act out and we're bad and we have no self-training." Therefore, stereotypes about Black girls' behavior and lack of culturally relevant perspective are significant concerns in need of attention when considering school discipline reform.

Use of Exclusion

Another theme that emerged from teacher data was the overall utility of current discipline practices. This included the appropriateness and effectiveness of methods like in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and other consequences. I asked teachers to describe the discipline practices they observe educators using with Black girls in their school, and if they felt that these practices were effective in addressing behavior concerns.

All teachers referenced the Progressive Discipline Plan: a document written and used by the school district, which outlines a specific sequence of consequences for each discipline infraction. Consequences become more punitive as multiple referrals for the same type of behavior occur. Teachers' overall attitudes were neutral toward the Progressive Discipline Plan. However, Mr. Carter expressed how this approach felt like going through the motions: "There are some [adults] where [they say], 'Well, listen. They have to have ISS 3 times until they get

put up for OSS or alternative school.’ And it's almost like you're just checking boxes," Mr. Carter. This observation suggests that teachers may view alternative consequences as a means to an end, and do not use them as conscious efforts to prevent exclusion. Further, this may suggest that educators do not implement consequences as intentionally supportive interventions.

Despite the district's effort with the Progressive Discipline Plan, teacher attitudes remain stuck in punishment. Ms. Williamson, who shared negative stereotypes about Black girls behavior, felt that attempts at school discipline were ineffective: "I don't have an answer for what we need to do with some of these students [Black girls]. Because this setting does not work for them. It doesn't work for all of them." Her belief that schools are not an appropriate place for Black girls is disheartening. It reflects the belief that Black girls do not deserve a space in public schools and instead deserve exclusion. This teacher perspective explains why Black girls, like Aurianna explained, have perceptions that being suspended is due to adults not wanting them at school.

A final finding on the use of exclusion was consistent with Black girls' experiences—the repeat offender phenomenon. Ms. Williamson talked about how consequences impact Black girls differently depending on their discipline history: "If they've [the Black girl] not been in trouble a lot, the phone call home will make an impression. But if they stay in trouble, that phone call home is nothing." Ms. Williamson's point is consistent with Black girls reporting harsher punishments when they have a history of receiving referrals. It is reassuring that Ms. Williamson is aware of needing to differentiate approaches depending on the student. However, educators must critically examine the effectiveness of reactive discipline, such as phone calls home.

Otherwise, the result becomes cycles of continuous, ineffective consequences, instead of proactively meeting the needs of Black girls.

The ineffectiveness of in-school suspension (ISS) was another point brought up by Mr. Elliott. His initial concern was related to the requirements of ISS:

If they're done with their work, some of them will go to sleep. I know at one point they were having to get a dictionary and write down definitions. So, not really reflective of the reason why they're there.

Mr. Elliott's example shows a disconnect between the referral and the consequence. In-school suspension is likely to be unsuccessful when Black girls are copying definitions as punishment for behavior. Mr. Elliott also shared how ISS could pose safety concerns with students engaging in conflict and then placed there together:

It could be an issue between 2 students that were assigned ISS, and they're being put in ISS together that day. It's like, what problem does that solve? They're still in a smaller environment with less students, where they could potentially have that interaction with each other again.

This is similar to Diamond, who shared she felt ISS could be unsafe due to limited supervision and putting students in conflict together. Here, Mr. Elliott discusses his assessment that ISS does not serve as a beneficial environment that addresses the root problem or concern. Instead of resolving social conflict and preventing it from happening again, he notes that students are put in ISS together with no direct intervention.

Negative Interactions Between Teachers and Black Girls

Negative interactions between teachers and Black girls are the final theme related to current practices from teacher interview data. This theme was discussed extensively in the findings from interviews with Black girls. Given that both data sources support this theme, schools should strongly consider developing recommendations for reform with this in mind.

Ms. Williamson expressed how she struggled with interactions, and described a type of power struggle: "You got to let them [Black girls] know you're going to stand up to them... you have to adjust with the child. Some of it will be good, and some of it you just, you stand your ground." Her discussion suggests that interactions with Black girls require establishing dominance.

Ms. Williamson went on to explain how she felt their behavior negatively impacted her relationships with Black girls: "But if they start that attitude and disrespect, that usually destroys our relationship." Here, Ms. Williamson places the blame for a poor student-teacher relationship on the Black girls. There is no discussion of attempting to improve the relationship, and instead, the teacher shuts down and does not pursue a better relationship. This is also reflected in Tierra's experiences with skipping class to avoid continuous arguments with the same teacher, and feeling the need to respond aggressively in response. Ms. Page also shared how she witnessed other teachers engaging in a similar power struggle with Black girls:

There was arguing [between] a student and teacher last year... it would build up. So it would start as something small like the eye roll or teeth sucking. And the teacher would say one thing, and then the student would reply back a little bit bigger. And then it would go back and forth until it was just a full-blown explosion of arguing and fussing.

Her experience is an example of how interactions between teachers and Black girls unravel. It mirrors the experiences from Black girls' interviews, where they shared that the teacher triggered their response by responding in a combative way. After sharing her story, Ms. Page reflects on where the response from Black girls stems from:

I don't know if that falls back to them [Black girls] feeling they have to be that strong to prove themselves. If it's because of things they've been through, so they're just reacting... I definitely think some teachers get ugly and argue with them [Black girls]."

Her reflection provides a hopeful mindset that teachers are willing to understand Black girls' behavior better and not take it at face value. Further, she realizes the need for change in teachers' responses and how current practices are inappropriate.

Themes about current practices and the beliefs teachers have about discipline closely align with those identified from interviews with the experiences Black girls endorsed. An acceptance of exclusion, existing stereotypes about Black girls, and the lack of positive outcomes from in-school suspension substantiate a need for reform. Adverse interactions between teachers and Black girls are a factor in need of significant attention and intervention, as Black girls identified the numerous ways they are impacted by this. As explained in a later section, establishing mutually respectful relationships between teachers and Black girls is a practice teachers endorse as being successful. The next category of themes discussed are those related to the negative social experiences among Black girls.

Social Conflict among Black Girls

This section discusses a theme related to social and emotional factors that influence Black girls' experiences with school discipline, which encompassed observations of social

conflict among Black girls that often resulted in discipline referrals or suspension. This theme from teacher interviews closely aligns with student interview data that supports concerns related to negative interactions among Black girls.

Teachers discussed how some Black girls engage in negative social interactions with one another. Ms. Page shared her observations: "I observed very vulgar conversation back and forth between the [Black] girls pertaining to clothes, hair, boys, girls, all sorts of things." Her account is consistent with Black girls' experiences with social conflict, who identified frequent discord among them. Mr. Carter also shared how there was often drama among Black girls: "[Having to say] all right, you go in this room, you go in this room. We're just going to have to separate for right now—a lot of what I would classify as drama." While separating the students ensures safety, how adults handle these incidents after heightened emotions have settled is crucial. Ms. Page also shared observing fighting among Black girls: "They would put hands on each other and physically fight... [there was] a lot of fighting."

Her observations of these physical altercations is similar to Black girls' experiences, including fighting as a result of miscommunications, spreading rumors, or inciting conflict if they disliked one another. Conversely, Black girls shared how there was a need for them to stand together and be able to support one another instead of always being against each other.

Teachers did not indicate any other social and emotional factors for Black girls. Based on the lack of data supporting this theme, teachers need more awareness about the emotional needs of Black girls and how discipline practices influence emotional well-being. However, concerns about social conflict among Black girls are consistent across both participant types and deserve

schools' attention for reform. In the next section, I discuss practices teachers shared using that may be beneficial to replicate.

Practices to Consider Replicating

This section outlines alternatives to traditional practices teachers identified as being successful when working with Black girls. To interpret findings using the Critical Race Feminism framework, the themes in this section are only those first identified by Black girls. This ensures recommendations are those that Black girls feel would benefit them and meet their needs. The two findings I discuss are the need for educators to establish effective relationships with Black girls, and also address stereotypes to increase understanding of Black girls' needs and behavior.

Establishing Effective Relationships

Teachers shared how creating positive relationships with Black girls helped them to be most successful at school. Ms. Page explained how she had success with establishing trust: “Once they realize they [Black girls] realize they can trust me, that I’m not just out to get them, their behavior and entire attitude changes.” Although she uses the word “attitude,” the underlying concept is that Black girls are more likely to be engaged and want to work with a teacher when there is mutual respect and trust. Mr. Elliott describes his experience with making a conscious commitment of prioritizing relationships: “Those were the girls that I actually focused on. It was like, I want to build the relationships with these [students].” His experience suggests that the first step is for teachers to realize when a relationship needs establishing. This approach requires a mindset change to bring Black girls closer instead of using punishment and exclusion.

Mr. Elliott went on to share how this strategy positively impacted the outcomes for Brooklyn, a Black girl in one of his classes:

You would have other teachers be like, “Oh, I’ve got an issue with Brooklyn.” It’s like, I don’t. What’s up with that? So I think a lot of just taking that time to get to know them [Black girls], build that relationship.

Mr. Elliot noted that teachers who did not establish relationships with Black girls were more likely to complain about behavior problems, write referrals, or send girls out of their classrooms. Conversely, he shared overall positive interactions with the Black girls he taught and enjoyed having them in his class. For example, Mr. Elliott shared how he maintained relationships with a particular Black girl by having a clean slate:

I always tell the students, always treat the next day as a new day. If it’s Monday [and] you’re cussing me out, Tuesday we’re coming back like it never happened. And I had that conversation with her the next day: “Hey, how’s your day going?” Just treated her like it didn’t happen.

Black girls shared that they needed empathetic adults who help them overcome challenges at school, not make them feel poorly for their behavior, or remind them of previous incidents. This approach is also a positive alternative to experiences like Tierra’s, who said she felt the need to hold a grudge with teachers when teachers responded negatively to her behavior. Instead, Mr. Elliott modeled how to move on from incidents, and maintain the positive flow of their relationship.

Mr. Carter provided additional ideas about how to connect with Black girls. He shared how knowing individual students allows him to foresee how an incident may unfold:

It's just trying to find that line between needing to blow off steam, and this is now an issue we have to deal with... There are some [Black girls] who are, "I'm going to say my piece and then I'm going to sit down and in 2 minutes, I'm done." And there are some that you know are going to stew on it all day, or because of whatever else they have going on, it's just never going to click back into place.

Here, Mr. Carter's experience shows that knowing his students informed how he responded or chose not to respond at all. His reflections are another example of putting forth an effort to understand Black girls' needs, and realizing that as individuals they will have varying responses. These teachers' experiences indicate actions to take to prioritize relationships with Black girls for positive outcomes.

Addressing Stereotypes and Understanding Behaviors

Having teachers recognize the stereotypes they have about Black girls was another finding from teacher data. Mr. Carter discussed the importance of being conscious about interpretations of behaviors:

I think a lot of people mistake volume for aggression. A lot of the Black girls I've taught and, not to stereotype, but a lot of them are loud. They like to be loud. They like to yell across the cafeteria. I don't even think it's necessarily for attention. But it's that if they're going to argue, or they have something to say, that they're going to say it. And even if they're getting loud, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're trying to be disrespectful.

Mr. Carter recognized the need for teachers to see beyond the behavior and understand that personal interpretations of behavior can be inaccurate. This is consistent with girls sharing the

need for teachers to understand their perspective of situations instead of making assumptions about their behavior.

Mr. Carter continued, "A lot of times you have to step back and say, "Well, wait a minute. Am I mad at this because they [the Black girl] yelled at me, or am I mad at this because this is a major issue?" This is another example of how teachers need to make a conscious effort to reflect on stereotypes and address their reactions to behavior versus what is truly a discipline issue.

Successful practices teachers shared using align with the needs endorsed by Black girls. This gives hope that positive reform is possible by means of intentionally focusing on Black girls' needs. Teachers demonstrating effective relationships with Black girls, and having differential experiences from teachers who do not, is evidence that this recommendation is critical. Beyond bolstering relationships, teachers must also make a conscious effort to dismantle stereotypes and reflect on their responses to discontinue cycles of hostile reactions that result in punishment. The final section of findings from teacher interviews outlines the potential positive impact teachers have seen when practices meet the needs of Black girls.

Potential Positive Outcomes

This last section of findings includes themes on positive outcomes teachers experienced when using alternative approaches with Black girls. These outcomes can be projected into the positive outcomes to expect if reform is accomplished at a systemic level to serve Black girls better. The themes discussed include recognizing Black girls' strengths, academic engagement, and preventative intervention with social conflict.

Creating opportunities for Black girls to demonstrate their strengths is the first finding on the potential benefits of reforming school discipline practices. Before discussing concerns with behavior and discipline, I asked teachers what positive traits and behaviors they observed from Black girls. All four teachers identified leadership skills, both socially and academically. When teachers gave Black girls the opportunity to demonstrate strengths, they were noticeable due to rapport with the teacher. Mr. Elliott shared how Alaysia, a particular Black girl's strengths were highlighted in the classroom when he established a relationship with her:

She was the one that I could put on my sub[stitute] plan saying, “This is the student that if you need anything, to [go] to.” She would be the one that when I put them [students] in groups to do group work, she was the leader.

Without prioritizing a relationship with her and giving her space and belonging in the classroom, Alaysia may have never been able to take on a leadership role. Mr. Elliott discussed how Alaysia looked out for students with disabilities, and if she saw them working alone or singled out, she would step in to support them. Mr. Elliott identified this trait as social empathy, noting that Alaysia set an example for positive behavior.

Mr. Carter also shared how effective teacher-student relationships generated pride within them for Black girls:

They can be much more fiercely loyal, in a good way. I’ve had issues where I’ll say something to a kid, and the kid will say something back. And they’ll [the Black girl] be like, “That’s my teacher, you need to stop.”

His example shows how Black girls can take a protective stance with the teacher when they have an invested, mutually respectful relationship.

In addition to emphasizing Black girls' strengths, Ms. Page also shared how having a relationship with Black girls allowed for social conflict to be resolved and avoided. As discussed earlier, social conflict among Black girls is a current need schools must address with discipline reform. Therefore, Ms. Page's experience is important to consider: "...they [Black girls] would come and confide in me, and I would let the office know about different things going on." She explained how students usually felt like they were "narcs" (someone who reports unsafe or inappropriate behavior going on) if they inform teachers, particularly bullying and fighting. Instead, by having a trusting relationship with the student, she was able to intervene during potentially unsafe situations.

Last, Mr. Elliott engaged in a discussion about the benefits he has witnessed from having effective relationships with Black girls. In contrast, he shared how other teachers struggled with academic engagement, and Black girls frequently did not participate in or skipped the classes of teachers who often reprimanded them. He went on to explain:

If you build that great relationship with that student, they're going to want to come. But if the relationship's not there, or [it's] some kind of relaxed nature in the classroom, they're not going to want to come.

He also references the classroom environment and that having structure and expectations in place will make Black girls want to attend. This finding aligns with the needs shared by Black girls of having a teacher who is empathetic but still holds them accountable for their success and actions.

Teachers reflected on the benefits they have seen when they maintain positive relationships. This is consistent with the benefits Black girls identified when they had a trusting,

empathetic relationship with a teacher. Having these relationships allows Black girls to share their strengths as leaders at school, demonstrate their respect, and have a voice in their classroom. Increased academic engagement as a potential benefit and early intervention with social conflict are also emerging positive benefits. Additional data is needed in these area to substantiate the recurrence of these outcomes.

Conclusion

Interviews conducted with teachers give hope in how discipline practices can be improved to meet the needs of Black girls in schools. While findings were not as robust as those from interviews with Black girls, findings that align with Black girls' experiences and needs were still present.

Findings on the current state of school discipline with Black girls were consistent with existing research and the perspectives of Black girls. Teachers shared how exclusion is considered acceptable and how current procedures in place are typically ineffective. Stereotypes about Black girls and their behavior are certainly ongoing and in need of addressing. Teachers also shared observations of poor interactions when teachers addressed Black girls and their behavior. These findings substantiate the areas in need of addressing.

Teachers identified minimal ways they view social and emotional factors playing a role in behavior and discipline. They cited personal stressors and home life as a factor and observations on social conflict among Black girls. The lack of findings in this thematic category indicates the need to educate teachers on Black girls' experiences and needs and bring awareness to the emotional impact of current practices.

It is encouraging that teachers could identify ways in which they have successfully supported Black girls in their classrooms. Consistent with student interview findings, effective relationships with Black girls are an integral approach. Teachers shared how this requires a conscious commitment and an effort to unpack biases about Black girls' behavior. They also explained how treating girls as individuals and not taking a one-size-fits-all approach to intervention is necessary, accompanied by a clean-slate mentality after challenging moments.

Positive outcomes resulting from these approaches included recognizing and emphasizing Black girls' strengths and providing the opportunity to be leaders. Teachers also shared stories of how academic engagement and social conflict intervention were possible due to improved relationships.

In order to utilize Black girls' voices and interpret findings from a Critical Race Feminism standpoint, the following discussion and recommendations will prioritize the needs and ideas they shared. Teachers' experiences consistent with the findings from Black girls' interviews will also be incorporated to validate the proposed interventions further.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This final chapter is a concluding discussion of my research. In this section, I discuss the findings of my work and answer the research questions posed. I also share the significance of these findings for practitioners, subsequent recommendations based on improvement science, and directions for future research. Finally, I discuss personal reflections from the research process and outline conclusions.

Findings

First, I review findings that answer the research questions posed in Chapter 1. I aim to discuss the following for each question: a critical examination of current practices, starting points for school discipline reform, and aligning findings with existing literature. These findings provide a baseline of the problem of practice to start from and a proposal to facilitate change. I summarize findings for student and teacher interviews separately to answer their respective research questions, then synthesize them to answer the third question regarding overall conclusions from the data.

Research Question 1: How can educators utilize feedback from Black girls to inform the discipline practices used with them?

Interviews with Black girls provided important information about their perspectives on current discipline practices and their emotional impact, alternatives they need, and benefits that would occur. These findings accomplish two things. First, they assist educators in critically examining current practices while increasing awareness of the detrimental effects they have.

Second, it provides schools and districts a starting point for the critical discussion about how practices need to change for schools to support Black girls better.

Critical Examination of Practices

Black girls shared experiencing feelings of being singled out by teachers for their behavior and that adults held stereotypes about their behavior. More specifically, Black girls experienced harmful interactions with teachers, including yelling and engaging in arguments. They explained how a teacher's approach to a situation influenced theirs. Therefore, if a teacher was verbally combative, she was likely to respond similarly. In addition, Black girls shared feelings of anger when adults negatively addressed them. This conflict with teachers results in feelings of isolation and that they are unwanted in school by adults.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that cites teacher stereotypes about Black girls' behavior such as being loud, verbally combative and defiant (Wun, 2016). Additionally, research has documented teacher perceptions of Black girls being overly assertive in the classroom, and consider these behaviors as challenges to authority (Morris, 2007). The current research serves as a connection between these consistent findings and approaches educators should consider to remediate this concern.

Additionally, Black girls explained the repeat-offender phenomenon—where if she received punishment before, she was more likely to receive punishment, and the punishment is harsher in the future. Given this experience, Black girls are subjected to feelings of isolation, anger, and disengagement repeatedly over time. Overall, Black girls expressed that poor communication facilitated by the adult was a primary challenge with current practices and resulted in emotional damage and exclusion. This finding is consistent with literature that

identified teachers' misinterpretation of Black girls' communication as being disobedient or assertive, and overall perceptions of challenging authority when speaking to an adult (Morris, 2007; Wun, 2016).

Last, girls shared discussion around social conflict among Black girls. They explained how poor interactions among Black girls often led to fighting, which would result in out-of-school suspension. This finding should not shed a negative light on Black girls' social behaviors. Instead, addressing patterns of verbal and physical altercations among Black girls will aid in promoting social and emotional wellness, eliminate the need for punitive consequences, increase safety, and promote connectedness among Black girls. Girls shared the feeling that Black girls should stick together instead of tearing one another down.

Little literature is available around the specific social experiences among Black girls in schools, however existing research does support that Black girls are punished at higher rates for aggressive behaviors, such as fighting, bullying and harassment (Morris & Perry, 2017). Therefore, adult interpretations of Black girls' social interactions as being overly aggressive may play a role. However, given that Black girls also shared that fighting and verbal conflicts were common, this concept of social conflict among Black girls in schools is an area in need of further research.

Additionally, some existing literature supports that Black girls often engage in physical contact in response to boys instead of letting an adult know about a problem. This is discussed as Black girls not asking for protection, and instead are willing to protect themselves and stand up for themselves (Morris, 2007). This could be a similar situation with Black girl to Black girl conflict that they may opt to engage in social conflict on their own as an effort to independently

protect themselves. More research is needed on this phenomenon and how it impacts Black girls in schools.

Black girls' feedback provides an extensive discussion on components of discipline that require addressing. Specifically, teacher-student interactions need improvement to avoid cycles of ineffective communication that result in escalating responses and punishment. Schools also need to address challenges with social conflict among Black girls to encourage positive interactions and social support. The following section will outline how Black girls specified achieving these goals.

Starting Points for Reform

Black girls' responses during interviews gave great insight into the specific ways practices could change to serve them better. These included improving relationships and communication between teachers and Black girls, and providing an extracurricular opportunity for Black girls exclusively. Girls also shared how these improvements would significantly change their outlook and attitudes towards school.

Given the problems with how adults address and interact with Black girls, it is unsurprising that they identified establishing beneficial relationships with Black girls as the primary way to improve their experiences with school discipline. Black girls shared how they needed supportive teachers who demonstrated empathy and did not make them feel bad for their behavior. Instead, they wished adults would have calm, constructive conversations with them. Girls also felt that adults established mutual respect by asking questions and understanding them and their behavior. Black girls want adults who will listen to their perspectives and work with them to improve when needed. Feedback gathered in the current study is similar to previous

work, which found that Black girls did not experience empathy from adults, with recommendations to train teachers in using empathetic, respectful approaches (Blake & Epstein, 2019).

Second, Black girls shared how they wanted an opportunity to come together in an extracurricular setting. Girls had ideas of how a group or program could be established only for Black girls. They shared various activities they would like to see, like crafts, music, hair and nails, and group discussions. Ultimately, girls want an opportunity to congregate and support one another. Girls also shared how adults facilitating conversations among Black girls to resolve conflict would help address concerns with fighting.

The concept of a program designed for Black girls could encompass various social and emotional supports, which would support the emotional needs they share and promote positive interactions among Black girls. This finding is consistent with a pilot study conducted by Epstein, Gonzalez, & Shinde (2021), who implemented a program that provided social-emotional learning opportunities, community circles, and restorative practices. Findings from that case study showed that girls' self-esteem and sense of trust increased as a result of single-gender opportunities for girls of color. Therefore, this concept shows promise of meeting the needs identified in the current study.

Girls shared the magnitude of ways their experiences would change for the better if these changes happened. They would have an improved sense of self, and their worries and stress about school would diminish. Improved relationships with adults would increase academic engagement and feelings that their experiences were validated and heard. Black girls also identified increased feelings of trust with adults and overall improved attitudes toward school.

In summary, findings from interviews with Black girls provided important feedback regarding the challenges they face, their perceptions of current practices, and specific ways schools and school districts can facilitate change.

Research Question 2: How do educators perceive discipline practices with Black girls; what feedback can they provide regarding alternatives to exclusionary discipline?

Teacher interviews also provided valuable information about discipline used with Black girls. In addition, they shared feedback on current practices and beliefs, and practices to consider replicating. While these findings are not as robust as those from interviews with Black girls, one may expect this, given that girls themselves are the best reporters on accomplishing supportive reform. Still, teacher interviews shed light on the problem of practice from the educator's vantage point, which is crucial. Therefore, this section provides insight into teachers' current beliefs about Black girls and school discipline and strategies they have used that are beneficial to consider expanding.

Critical Examination of Practices

Interviews provided evidence that some teachers continue to have stereotypes about Black girls and their behavior and believe that exclusion is the best option for discipline. This finding is consistent with previous research citing biases about Black girls being disrespectful, aggressive, and disruptive (Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016).

Additionally, teachers expressed concerns about how the school's current protocols are ineffective, including the Progressive Discipline Plan and in-school suspension. They shared that the district's Progressive Discipline Plan is an admirable attempt to curb the use of exclusion. However, its utility becomes a formality of checking boxes instead of an active way to

implement better strategies that benefit students. One teacher described in-school suspension as a holding cell for students, with no intervention that addresses why students are there or to improve social or emotional functioning.

More specifically, teachers shared how they often witnessed other teachers engaging in power struggles. These interactions looked like a combative back-and-forth exchange of words, which would escalate to a heated argument. Reflections also indicated that teachers felt the need to maintain a position of control with Black girls by communicating that they were not intimidated or let up with consequences. Overall, teachers identified poor interactions with Black girls and a lack of realization of this discord.

Research specific to the poor interactions between teachers and Black girls, or even students of color is limited to recommendations on improving teacher-student relationships through use of frameworks like positive behavior intervention systems (PBIS) (Blake et al., 2011). Existing research cites that teachers are interpreting Black girls' behavior through a biased lens (Morris & Perry, 2017). However additional research is needed to understand how this marginalization manifests, such as in the form of poor communication and power struggles.

Last, teachers also shared observations of verbal aggression and fighting among Black girls. They described instances where girls had to be separated to avoid physical altercations, and the lack of positive interactions among them was a noted need. As explained earlier, literature on social conflict is not currently available, and further research is needed to understand this phenomenon and its impact on Black girls' social experiences at school.

Overall, experiences shared during teachers' interviews reiterate much of what is known about the challenges Black girls face with school discipline. Minimal findings indicate teachers'

awareness of its impact on their social, emotional, and mental health wellness, which inadvertently cites an additional gap in current practices. Next, I review ideas for reform teachers identified.

Starting Points for Reform

Teachers also provided feedback regarding strategies they have had success with, which schools and systems could potentially replicate to use at a larger scale. Again, I only discuss strategies consistent with Black girls' perspectives, as recommendations must align with their shared needs. Many of the success stories teachers shared aligned with the needs shared by Black girls, thus explaining their effectiveness.

Teachers shared how establishing a positive relationship with Black girls led to successes in their classroom. These relationships required getting to know Black girls personally and establishing trust. The result was observable differences in interactions, as teachers who did not take the time to form positive relationships struggled with behavior management and respectful exchanges. Having a clean-slate mentality when undesired exchanges happen is also needed. Effective relationships require a conscious commitment and actively considering how personal biases and reactions to behavior impact interactions. Existing research repeatedly supports the need for teachers to be educated in and be assisted with unraveling stereotypes and biases about Black girls, which would aid in achieving this commitment (Blake & Epstein, 2020; Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017; Morris, 2016).

When attained, mutually respectful relationships between teachers and Black girls have promising outcomes. For example, teachers shared how improved interactions and relationships resulted in timely intervention with social conflict issues and Black girls confiding in teachers

with potential problems. Further, Black girls can be leaders in the classroom, and their strengths receive attention instead of discipline issues taking the limelight.

Overall, findings from interviews with teachers provide insight into the shortcomings of today's practices and the bright spots of successful alternatives. This feedback provides evidence of changes that need to occur while also offering logical alternatives that appear promising at a small scale. When implemented with an approach in improvement science, these alternatives could be significant in reshaping the experiences Black girls have with school discipline.

Research Question 3: What can we learn from student and educator perspectives to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline with Black girls?

To answer the third research question, I outline the consistencies between teachers' interviews and the findings from interviews with Black girls. The goal is to analyze similar components as the previous questions, but synthesize findings to provide a holistic picture of current practices, and alternative approaches to school discipline that will decrease the use of exclusion with Black girls. This discussion differs from the first two, as it makes direct connections between needs and recommendations. The result is a comprehensive overview that will aid educators in understanding how reform efforts are linked to specific needs, while keeping Black girls' voices as the focal point.

Improving Teacher-Student Relationships

The primary need identified by Black girls was having empathetic, supportive relationships with their teachers. Currently, ineffective communication from teachers strains their relationships with Black girls, such as yelling and accusations. As a result, power struggles arise, where teachers strain for control of the situation. These approaches trigger anger in Black girls,

who defend themselves by raising their voices and concerns. These interactions escalate until teachers fault the student, resulting in punishment. The outcomes are disengagement from school, damaged connections with teachers, and emotional turmoil for Black girls.

Exceptions give a glimpse into how schools can remediate this problem. For example, Black girls identified specific actions teachers take to foster relationships, such as asking questions, listening to their perspectives, and offering support instead of ostracizing them for their behavior. These are substantial improvements in the communication and connection between Black girls and their teachers, which teachers also shared is possible when made a priority.

Teachers also have to unpack the stereotypes they hold about Black girls to foster an empathetic and culturally responsive connection. For example, girls are aware that teachers have preconceived notions of being "bad" and always in trouble. Realizing these stereotypes will help teachers reflect on their responses to behavior and work toward understanding Black girls' behavior instead of making assumptions.

When interactions improve, educators no longer put Black girls in a position to defend themselves or their behavior. Instead, they can voice their needs and perspective and feel wanted at school by adults. As a result, emotional and mental health wellness improves, and there is greater engagement for Black girls in school.

Ensuring Social and Emotional Wellness for Black Girls in Schools

The other primary need Black girls shared was to increase feelings of inclusion at school physically, emotionally, and socially. Black girls felt that teachers lacked empathy and made them feel that they were unwanted in school. This finding is consistent with previous research

citing that teachers are less likely to be compassionate and demonstrate empathy toward Black girls (Blake & Epstein, 2019). Black girls need opportunities to talk through their experiences and receive support from adults instead of current experiences that attempt to silence them and make assumptions about their behavior.

Additionally, Black girls shared feelings of anger in response to adults addressing their behavior. Poor communication, including yelling and arguing, was shared as triggers for their anger. Teachers also reported observing adults initiating power struggles with Black girls, which led to escalating arguments. These emotional implications are detrimental, as Black girls felt guilty after these interactions but stuck in a cycle when they began to anticipate the negative interactions.

Prompting social wellness includes improving interactions among Black girls. Black girls shared experiencing frequent discord, including physical altercations and hostile verbal exchanges, and teachers also observed fighting among them. Not only does this compromise the safety of Black girls, but also the social connectedness among them. Black girls shared the feeling that they should stick together, given their unique experiences and hardships.

Schools need to be intentional about resolving conflicts, and more importantly, avoided to ensure social inclusion. Alternatives include effective remediation among Black girls when problems arise and taking a proactive approach to increasing positive social interactions. For example, black girls shared wanting to have a group or program designed for them. This approach could allow them to discuss different topics, including social and emotional needs, and promote empathy and connectedness among Black girls.

Fostering social and emotional wellness can be accomplished when educators prioritize the experiences of Black girls by establishing mutually respectful relationships and provide opportunities to be heard and validated. Safe and supportive relationships with other Black girls and room to express themselves and receive support are also vital components. The result is alleviated stress about school, a positive sense of self, and feelings of belonging.

Recommendations

In this section, I summarize results from an improvement science standpoint based on the findings discussed in the previous sections. Results include interventions and changes for schools to use in a PDSA cycle format. The two focus areas are improving teacher relationships with Black girls and developing supportive programs exclusive for Black girls. I selected these to address the most frequently discussed concerns in the findings. Interventions I discuss are not all-encompassing ideas for reform, and others are likely needed to meet Black girls' needs completely. These results are starting points for school teams to consider when beginning discussions and initiating change. Finally, I outline specific recommendations for interventions and how to structure them through PDSA cycles.

Improving Teacher Relationships with Black Girls

An overarching finding in need of targeting through PDSA cycles is improving teacher relationships with Black girls. Black girls shared the importance of having supportive adults who engage in constructive conversations with them. Teachers' experiences also revealed success when they intentionally fostered positive relationships with Black girls. More specifically, Black girls cited needing adults who will ask questions to understand them better, demonstrate empathy, and work with them to reinforce their success. Establishing such a dynamic role

requires intentional effort and an explicit approach. An evidence-based approach called the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) method is recommended.

Professional Development: The Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) Method

Its creators developed the EMR method to address gaps in available professional development for strengthening relationships between teachers and their students. Cook et al. (2018) spearheaded this method to provide a detailed outline for teachers to initiate the relationship with the student, employ maintenance techniques, and restore the relationship as needed when negative interactions occur. Emerging research on this method shows promising results for improving academic and behavioral outcomes for students (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019; Gaias et al., 2020). If utilized with the needs of Black girls in mind, this could be a promising intervention to end exclusion.

To confirm its utility with Black girls, I will review the three phases and connect them to my research findings. According to their framework, the "Establish" phase has teachers extend the opportunity to connect with the student by asking open-ended questions, demonstrating interest in them, and validating students' viewpoints. Black girls shared how they benefit from teachers asking questions and working to understand them and their experiences, therefore, the "Establish" step of EMR meets this need. The "Maintain" phase intentionally provides students with positive interactions with their teacher by establishing high rates of positive praise. This will create opportunities for adults to recognize and highlight Black girls' strengths and make a conscious effort to engage in positive interactions as a buffer should conflict arise.

Since conflict is unavoidable entirely, the "Restore" phase has the teacher and student engage in a restorative conversation following a negative interaction. The focus of this stage is

effective communication, which was an essential finding of the current study. Overall, the EMR Method appears to meet various needs Black girls shared, including empathetic, supportive relationships that utilize productive communication to avoid and remediate conflict.

To avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, employing the EMR Method in PDSA cycles is recommended. To do this, school teams may opt to identify a small sample of teachers that would benefit from improving their relationships (ex. Teachers who struggle with interacting with Black girls, teachers who make a high number of referrals for Black girls). Teachers will be trained in the EMR Method and begin using it with the Black girls they teach. Teams consisting of the teacher, Black girl, and facilitator (administrator, support staff) should meet regularly to evaluate the intervention's success and identify any necessary modifications. Then, the teachers continue to employ the improved practices, and the school will scale up with appropriate and ready. See Appendix C for a step-by-step process of the PDSA cycle using the EMR Method.

Development of Programs Exclusive for Black Girls

The other specific recommendation to implement using PDSA cycles is a program exclusive for Black girls. During interviews, Black girls shared how having a group or program designed specifically for them would be beneficial. This opportunity would provide a space for Black girls to congregate and share their experiences and support one another socially and emotionally. Girls shared some ideas of what the program could include, such as group discussions about experiences as Black girls, emotional needs, and personal stressors; engaging in positive activities like art, crafts, and hair/makeup; and discussing emotional needs with trusted adults. An intervention focusing on improving interactions and relationships among Black girls aligns with needs surrounding social conflict.

This recommendation promotes strategies consistent with Critical Race Feminism, which prioritizes Black girls' experiences with intersectionality of race and gender (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Given that Black girls' needs and realities differ from their Black boy or White girl counterparts, it is necessary to give space and attention to them intentionally (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). A program or group dedicated to Black girls is a starting point for schools to move away from traditional discipline and begin using practices that acknowledge their unique experiences.

To maintain an approach in Critical Race Feminism, the structure of this intervention heavily relies on Black girls playing a central role in its development. Therefore, I do not provide a discussion of the exact guidelines for developing this program. Instead, I leave it intentionally open-ended to allow Black girls to lead in its organization and development.

During the Plan phase of the PDSA cycle implementation, schools need to include Black girls in discussing its design, including opportunities and activities offered, adults that will facilitate the group/program, format of sessions, and topics to address. Balancing adult input with a Black girl-centered approach is necessary.

The Do phase will require the execution of the plans made. The same team who met for the Planning phase—including Black girls—will meet for the Study phase to review the outcome of the program's initiation, including successes and necessary changes. The program will be adjusted based on these findings during the Act phase. The program may also expand and grow in size as multiple PDSA cycles work through adjustments needed. See Appendix D for a step-by-step process of the PDSA cycle to use with this program.

This recommendation for a group or program intended explicitly for Black girls creates an automatic space for them in schools. It moves away from reactive approaches intended to intervene with Black girls being the "high flyers" with discipline and instead creates an open opportunity for all Black girls. While the types of activities employed in this are loosely defined, this allows Black girls to play an integral role in its vision. By giving Black girls ownership, the program is likely to succeed in supporting their social and emotional needs. An approach using improvement science PDSA cycles lends itself well to their inclusion, as their ideas of what is beneficial and effective may change as the program comes to life. Thus, the program is a fluid process that can change as both Black girls and educators better understand how to match their needs and ensure success.

The two recommendations discussed in this section include piloting the EMR method and creating an extracurricular program specifically for Black girls. An overview of how schools can implement these using improvement science through PDSA cycles clearly shows how teams can Plan for their implementation, enact them, study effectiveness, and monitor and adjust as needed. The inclusion of key stakeholders— teachers and Black girls— is a critical component throughout cycles. PDSA cycles move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and instead fluidly develop interventions that are unique for Black girls. In the next section, I make personal reflections of my experiences conducting this research.

Significance

This study offers benefits to the existing research available on discipline practices used with Black girls in schools. In addition to confirming previous findings, these results expand the

conversation by moving toward interventions and their implementation while maintaining Black girls' needs at the center.

Most of the existing research available establishes the problem of practice and its impact on Black girls. A recent article published by Addington (2021) pushed the conversation toward potential interventions. Otherwise, less research is available about plausible alternatives or approaches practitioners can use to remediate this concern. This research is a significant contribution, as it identifies the specific needs of Black girls that reform efforts must address. While it remains hypothetical until educators pilot interventions and determine their effectiveness, there are clear starting points as schools begin conversations of where to begin.

Additionally, these recommendations are made based on the feedback from Black girls, in conjunction with teachers' feedback to further substantiate their validity. Black girls' experiences informed the recommendations made in this work, and approaches in improvement science will continue to center them in the development of school discipline reform efforts.

PDSA cycles promote small-scale trials, which are necessary since restructuring discipline practices with Black girls is new territory for educators (Bryk et al., 2017). It also promotes efforts from a Critical Race Feminism standpoint by including and working to understand the unique needs of Black girls at the intersection of race and gender (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Thus, educators will no longer make blanket assumptions about potential interventions. Instead, short trials of interventions based on the needs identified by Black girls themselves will increase the likelihood of successful, beneficial practices.

My work proposes an improvement science approach using a Critical Race Feminism framework. As a result, findings move the conversation about Black girls and school discipline away from observable behaviors to begin a necessary discussion about the mental health, social, and emotional wellness of Black girls. Instead of focusing on alternative discipline consequences, proposed recommendations center on practices that support Black girls from a social-emotional standpoint. Thus, the focus is not just on changing educator practices but prioritizing the emotional needs of young Black girls.

Last, my work extends the literature about populations of Black girls in different geographic locations. Much of existing research uses samples from populations of Black girls in large suburban or metropolitan areas or areas in the North or Midwest United States. In contrast, this research took place in a rural school district in the Southern United States. These findings are an important extension in research given the historical implications of race and racism in the South, therefore differentiating the experiences of Black girls in this geographic location. Further, 40% of South Carolina's schools are located in rural areas and have a higher than average enrollment of students of color (Rural School and Community Trust, 2019). Therefore, understanding challenges for Black students, specifically in the context of rural areas, needs attention. The current research begins to fill the void of knowledge available to educators.

Reflections

During the research process, I made reflections based on my positionality as a White woman and educator. Despite feeling confident at the outset of this work, the first interview with a Black girl squashed my ego. I felt the hesitation and reservations she had as I began the

interview. They hung in the air, and I had to pause the recording to regroup. I reassured her of confidentiality and safety, but more than anything, I realized how foreign this was for us both

I could not force the conversation we needed to have into specific interview questions. Although semi-structured, reading from the protocol still felt inauthentic. It still felt like an interrogation, so I knew the power imbalance was there because of my skin color, age, position, or perceived authority. With every interview, I realized how crucial my approach was.

When I began the interviews as a conversation about the school year (What has been challenging this year? What has gone well? Is there anything you need support with?), conversations quickly engaged. I let the girls know I was not there to only reap their experiences for adults' benefit, but I was there for them and cared about who they were in this school. I began using the protocol as a reference instead of the immediate starting point. By beginning the process from a neutral standpoint, interviews were much more conversation-oriented. Reservations—both my own and the girls'—seemed to diminish.

After analyzing findings and seeing the importance of relationships, it made sense that I needed to set a connected tone before diving into hard to discuss questions. While this seems obvious, it took ditching the interview protocol (not entirely) and knowing the talking points I needed to cover. The questions did not have to come out verbatim, but they needed to relate to the specific girl in front of me and her experiences. They needed to interweave with authentic inquisition (What do you mean? What was that like? How did that affect you?) for the sake of understanding the girl within the experience, and not just the experience itself.

I share this reflection to let other White educators know that there is importance in recognizing the obstacles in this work. Realizing one's ignorance of the topic and how your race,

gender, and other positionality components are not enough to gain access to the genuine parts we need to understand Black girls' realities. This work takes thoughtful intentions. It was not enough for me to want to know more. I needed to develop investment in the student, not just the information I was seeking. As educators, if we want to create meaningful relationships with Black girls and facilitate change, it takes committing to the students and their realities, not just the outcome we hope to achieve.

I asked the girls I interviewed about their overall reactions to the interviews, both to understand their feelings about the process and assess my role as the researcher. Most said they enjoyed the experience, one even asked when we were going to do it again! When I asked if adults had ever asked them questions like this, all said no, but generally expressed feeling like they were important conversations to have. Some said they were uncomfortable at first because they did not want to offend me with their responses, which was also apparent in beats of hesitation and facial expressions that conveyed, "You really want me to answer that honestly?" The barriers are real, but recognizing them and actively reflecting on alternative approaches make them manageable.

As I prepared for this research, I repeatedly asked myself if I could do this. Could a White woman with no experience or perspective even close to Black women and girls' insert herself into this problem of practice and indeed facilitate change? I searched for the answer to this as I collected data. While I believed all along the answer was 'yes,' I felt the need to validate that belief. While I did not begin this work for selfish reasons, I still wanted to explore this for the sake of conveying this confirmation to other White and possibly female researchers.

I found the realization at last, in the change of energy and mood when I asked girls about the future: If these challenges disappeared all of a sudden— if you came to school tomorrow and you no longer experienced what you shared with me today, what would that be like? The hope was palpable. I saw smiles, relaxed shoulders, sighs of relief. One girl laughed as if I was joking, then realized I was serious, and she looked astounded as if no one had made that seem possible before. The change was instant. If that is possible by just imagining it, the reality of these benefits would be immeasurable.

This evidence is why White educators can and need to research Black girls', and other marginalized groups of students' experiences in schools. We do not have to live their experiences to facilitate reform and advocate for their mental and physical well-being. However, we do have to empathize with their realities and commit to change for hope in the future.

Conclusion

The current study began with a problem of practice centered on the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with Black girls. Findings provide a new perspective of the actual problem in schools—a lack of emotional, social, and mental health support for Black girls. By having an accurate understanding of the problem in need of addressing, appropriate interventions and action can begin.

This concept is the basis of improvement science—understanding a problem for what it truly is without assumptions made from a bird's eye perspective. Educators make appropriate conclusions about the needs of Black girls by obtaining the vantage point of those most affected by the problem. This knowledge informs intervention development, and small successes can

begin with future replication. Success is promising, given that educators base efforts on the actual problem of the unmet needs of Black girls.

The purpose of this research is to inform school discipline reform. However, in addition to practices, our understanding of appropriate discipline must be reframed as well. The word "discipline" holds a negative connotation, which conveys a consequence of one's actions. Instead, educators must rethink and shift to improving approaches when working with Black girls, as recommendations are all preventative. Schools must move away from the concept of reactive discipline and view reform efforts as support systems to engage and empower Black girls on the front end. When accomplished, any justification for exclusion becomes null. Schools eliminate challenges once thought of as behavior problems when educators provide Black girls with space to heal and grow socially and emotionally through meaningful relationships.

I discussed two primary approaches to reform using PDSA cycles. However, the opportunities are not limited to these. An intervention that prioritizes the relationships between teachers and Black girls and their social and emotional well-being is likely to be beneficial. However, schools must conduct similar needs assessments of the Black girls they serve to define the problem of practice in their context, explicitly design reform, and execute using PDSA cycles.

Black girls are deserving of empathy, support, connectedness, and social belonging in schools. Unfortunately, current practices deny these and fail to meet their needs to ensure academic and behavioral success. Schools must take the time to listen to their experiences to inform change efforts and hear their voices for the valuable individuals they are. As a result,

Black girls are no longer the scapegoat for schools' shortcomings with discipline and instead are the epicenter for reform.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

Information:

Date: Time: Location:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Interviewer:

Introduction:

My name is Aubrey Isaacson, and I am conducting interviews as part of my research for my doctoral dissertation at Clemson University. My research works toward understanding how school discipline, which are consequences or punishment for behavior at school, affects Black girls specifically. Today I will be asking you questions about your thoughts and experiences as a student at Madison County Middle School. Your answers will not be tied to any identifying information and will be kept anonymous, so please be as open and honest as you feel comfortable. Your answers will be used to potentially change how discipline is used with Black girls. Your participation is completely voluntary, and if at any time you wish to discontinue the interview, please let me know.

Today's interview will be audio recorded using this device. Are you still comfortable with me recording our conversation today?

Great! Let's go ahead and get started. Please stop me if you have any questions, or need me to explain anything as we go.

Interview Questions:

As we know, you are in the ___ grade at Madison County Middle School. Did you attend Madison County for 9th/10th/11th grade too?

How would you describe what it's like being a student at Madison County Middle School?

You can talk about classes, teachers, sports, clubs ... anything you think would be important for someone to know who has never been here.

What about how behavior is handled? Sometimes we call this "discipline" – which means if a student gets corrected or punished for something they do, or maybe don't do at school. Sometimes it can be office referrals, phone calls home, in-school suspension (ISS), being suspended out of school (OSS), or even being expelled. **How would you describe how adults handle behavior, or discipline at Madison County Middle School?**

Tell me about your experiences with school discipline at Madison County Middle School.

What does this look like for you?

You can tell me about specific situations, or talk in general about what this looks like day to day.

How would you compare your experiences with school discipline to the experiences of other students?

What about in comparison to boys/male students?

What about in comparison to girls who are a different race than you?

What makes you think your experience is similar / is different from theirs?

Students have different experiences with behavior and discipline at school for many different reasons. There is research that says that the race, or gender of a student can influence how their behavior is handled at school.

Do you think that being a girl has effected how adults address your behavior at school? What about being Black? What about being both Black and a girl?

Do you think other Black girls at school have similar experiences to yours?

What would make their experiences similar / different?

What are your overall thoughts or feelings about your experiences with school discipline?

Do you believe your experiences with school discipline have impacted your school performance?

Do you believe they will effect anything for you in your future?

Is there anything you wish you could change about how adults address you or your behavior at school?

What specifically would you want to change?

Why do you think it's important that this changes?

Do you have ideas of how that could happen?

Tell me about a time where you received in/out of school suspension, and you did not feel it was a fair or appropriate consequence.

Start by telling me how the situation started, and what happened next.

What made you feel the consequence was unfair / inappropriate?

Now let's pretend that we can rewind that scenario, and have a different outcome.

How do you wish that situation had been handled?

What would the adults have done differently to make it a more positive outcome?

How would that have changed future interactions with that adult / teacher?

If you came to school tomorrow, and the challenges you've mentioned with school discipline disappeared, what would that look like?

What would the adults be doing, or what would they not be doing?

What would feel different?

How would this change your experience at school?

Is there anything else you want to talk about or share with me about your experiences with school discipline?

Closing:

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this interview with me today. Do you have any questions for me?

Your responses today are extremely important in the research I'm doing. Please remember that while your thoughts and ideas may be shared to change discipline practices at school, your personal information will be kept completely confidential. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns after today. Thank you again!

Appendix B

Educator Interview Protocol

Information:

Date: Time: Location:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Interviewer:

Introduction:

My name is Aubrey Isaacson, and I am conducting interviews as part of my research for my doctoral dissertation at Clemson University. My research works toward understanding how school discipline, which are consequences or punishment for behavior at school, affects Black girls specifically. Today I will be asking you questions about your thoughts and experiences as a teacher / administrator at Madison County Middle School. Your answers will not be tied to any identifying information and will be kept anonymous, so please be as open and honest as you feel comfortable. Your participation is completely voluntary, and if at any time you wish to discontinue the interview, please let me know.

Today's interview will be audio recorded using this device. Are you still comfortable with me recording our conversation today?

Great! Let's go ahead and get started. Please stop me if you have any questions, or need me to explain anything as we go.

Interview Questions:

As we know, you are a teacher / administrator at Madison County Middle School. How long have you taught / worked here? What subjects do you / have you taught previously?

Can you describe typical student behaviors you observe at Madison County Middle School?

Are there any specific details of behavior that are especially challenging? This could be types of behavior, times of day, specific areas ... anything that stands out as an area that is particularly challenging in relation to student behavior.

What about how behavior is handled? We often call this "discipline" – which is when a student gets corrected or punished for something they do, or maybe don't do at school. Sometimes it can include office referrals, phone calls home, in-school suspension (ISS), being suspended out of school (OSS), or being expelled. **How would you describe how behavior is addressed, or how discipline is handled at Madison County Middle School?**

Let's talk about specific students and their behaviors. **Tell me about the typical interactions you have with the Black girls in your classroom. How would you describe them?**

How are these interactions different from girls who are another race?

Can you tell me about behaviors you've experienced with Black girls?

What are some of the positive behaviors you've observed Black girls demonstrating in your classroom?

Are there behaviors Black girls demonstrate that are challenging for you to work with?

What about these behaviors is challenging for you?

Students have different experiences with behavior and discipline at school for many different reasons. There is research that says that the race, or gender of a student can influence their experiences with discipline at school, and how their behavior is addressed.

Tell me about the disciplinary actions that you've observed with Black girls in your classroom, or the school in general.

Do you see Black girls' experiences with school discipline as being different from girls who are another race?

What about their experiences is similar / different?

In-school and out of school suspension are often used as consequences for behavior at school. **In your experience, how effective have these consequences been for your students?**

What about them has been effective / ineffective?

How effective are these discipline practices effective for Black girls?

What about them has been effective / ineffective?

Tell me about a time where in/out of school suspension was used with a Black girl, and it did not seem like an appropriate or effective consequence.

Start by telling me how the situation started in your classroom, and what happened next.

What made you feel that the consequence was inappropriate / ineffective?

Let's pretend that we can rewind that scenario, and have a different outcome. What might that have looked like?

What would you have done differently in that situation?

How would a different outcome for that student have changed your future interactions with them?

Is there anything else you want to talk about or share with me about your experiences with school discipline?

Closing:

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this interview with me today. Do you have any questions for me?

Your responses today are extremely important in the research I'm doing. Please remember that while your thoughts and ideas may be shared to change discipline practices at school, your personal information will be kept completely confidential. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns after today. Thank you again!

Appendix C

Step-by-Step PDSA Cycle for Piloting EMR Method

Plan

- A school team consisting of administrators and support staff meet to identify specific teachers to participate.
 - *Considerations:* Beginning with a small sample of teachers (3-5); Identify those who may benefit from improving their relationships with Black girls; Data sources may include referral data--look at teachers frequently making referrals for disrespectful, disruptive, and disruptive behaviors.

Do

- Teachers are provided training in the EMR Method. This can be done by a support staff member who is familiar with the method and is available to provide ongoing guidance to teachers.
- Teachers begin employing EMR strategies.
 - *Considerations:* Utilizing implementation fidelity tools.

Study

- The school team reconvenes to examine the Plan's effectiveness.
- The sample of teachers and the Black girls they work with should be brought to the team at this point.
- The team identifies strengths and weaknesses of the Plan.
 - *Considerations:* Data sources may include referral data--looking for changes in rates of referrals, teacher reactions and feedback, Black girls' reactions and feedback, implementation fidelity data.

Act

- Teachers continue employing EMR strategies with changes identified during the Study phase.

Appendix D

Step-by-Step PDSA Cycle for Developing a Program Exclusive to Black Girls

Plan

- A school team consisting of administrators, support staff, and Black girls meet to design the vision of the program.
- Black girls' participation may be recruited through school-appropriate advertising.
- Decisions are mutually agreeable for both educators and Black girls.
 - *Considerations:* Giving Black girls ownership of the content of the program, including format, size, activities, topics to discuss, goals of the program.

Do

- The program is initiated as designed.

Study

- The school team reconvenes to examine the Plan's effectiveness.
- The team identifies strengths and weaknesses of the Plan.
 - *Considerations:* Data sources may include feedback from girls participating in the program using a survey.

Act

- The program continues with changes identified during the Study phase.

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