Discipline Disproportionality in Rural Schools in the South

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This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to examine principals' responses to their schools' disproportionate discipline data in five schools located in the rural southeastern United States. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed for principals' insight into their school discipline data. Results indicated that Black students were being disciplined at higher rates than white students in all five schools with principals sharing varied responses in discussing perceptions of causality. Principals attributed disproportionate discipline to a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, followed by student trauma and mental health issues. Recommendations are made for principal action and preparation.

*Keywords***:** discipline, disproportionality, rural, leadership, data use

This study examined the disproportionate rate of student discipline actions for Black students compared to White students in five schools located in the rural southeastern United States. Because disproportionate discipline has been a focus of study mostly in urban school contexts (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010), less is known about disproportionate discipline in rural schools relative to Black students in these contexts (Brushaber-Drockton, 2019; Lavalley, 2018).

The trend of Black students receiving discipline in schools at higher rates than White students has been noted for over four decades (Children's Defense Fund [CDF], 1975; Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). Nationally, Black students receive exclusionary discipline, including suspension and expulsion, at a rate of three times more than White students (Wald & Losen, 2003). On average, 50% of Black students report they have experienced suspension or expulsion at least one time in their school career, compared to 20% of white students (Wallace et al., 2008).

In the state where this study was enacted, Black students receive an average of 117.6 discipline infractions per 100 students, whereas white and other race students receive 37 - 40 infractions per 100 students. Black students in the state receive 25% of referrals for exclusionary discipline, compared to 13.5% for white students. Between 2006 and 2012, the use of in-school suspension (ISS) for Black students in the state increased while the rate for white students decreased (Anderson, 2018). During this same time period, the state was 15th in the nation for the use of out-of-school suspension (OSS) for all students and ranked 13th for the gap between Black and white students for OSS (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

This study analyzed principals' responses to their own schools' data, exploring perceptions of disproportionate discipline causality. The research questions for this study were (1) How is discipline disproportionality perceived in rural schools from the principal's perspective? and (2) What factors are most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality in rural schools from the principal's perspective? In this study, disproportionality in discipline is defined as the over- or underrepresentation of students in discipline incidents when compared to the percentage of the student population the racial group comprises.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens to examine disproportionality in school discipline. CRT frames the intersections of race, racism, and power. The basic tenets of CRT are: (1) racism is pervasive and institutionalized in the United States; (2) because racism advances the interests of whites, many are not interested in abandoning it; (3) race is a social construction; and (4) minority groups are racialized differently throughout history (Delgado & Stefanic, 2011).

The tenets of CRT intersect with school discipline as educators make decisions about students shaped by their implicit biases, especially when the decision being made is subjective (Pearson et al., 2009). According to Gillborn (2014), CRT is a tool used to maintain white supremacy and oppress non-white identities. In schools, discipline policy is used as a justification for excluding students from the classroom, thus taking away their right to learn and contributing to their lack of belonging. In the context of this study, discipline policies function as a tool of oppression.

CRT is an appropriate framework for this study because of its focus on how racism becomes institutionalized in systems in the United States. Schools are microcosms of society, and the policies used to "manage" students perpetuate systemic racism (Simson, 2014). CRT has been used as the framework for examining how school discipline impacts students of color in a number

of studies, including in middle schools (Wiley, 2020), in examining statewide discipline systems (Gillborn, 2014), and in understanding how restorative justice and trauma-informed practices are in alignment with CRT (Simson, 2014; Dutil, 2020).

Literature Review

Discipline in schools typically consists of a teacher making a discipline referral for a student who is perceived as breaking the norms of the school and often results in punitive consequences, including student detention, parent conferences, corporal punishment, ISS, OSS, and expulsion. Consequences are applied by administrators according to the school discipline plan, which must align with federal and state policies. Often, groups of students are disproportionately affected by discipline decisions, notably Black students (CDF, 1975; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2018; Skiba et al., 2002, 2011).

Racial bias plays a significant role in the disproportionate discipline rate for Black students across multiple studies. Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that Black students had a 24 - 80% higher chance of receiving a referral compared to white students. Black students were more likely to be referred to the office for offenses that were subjective in nature (e.g., disrespect, defiance) while white students were more likely to be referred for objective offenses (e.g., smoking, vandalism; McKintosh et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2002; Tajalli & Garba, 2014).

Recent studies on disproportionate outcomes for students deepen our understanding of this issue. Black students comprise 18% of school enrollment but represent 42% of all students suspended and 48% of the students who have had more than one OSS (OCR, 2014). This suggests that even though Black students make up one-fifth of the student population, they comprise almost half of the suspensions.

As students get older, data indicate Black students are pushed out of the classroom at even higher rates. Elementary-level Black students were twice as likely as white students to receive a discipline referral and four times as likely at the middle school level (Skiba et al., 2011). For Black female students, the outcomes are even worse. Black females were suspended more than females of any other ethnicity (OCR, 2014). In 2013, Black females made up 50.7% of all girls with multiple out-of-school suspensions while Black boys made up 39.9% of all boys with multiple OSS (OCR, 2014). Females with darker skin and more Afro-centric features were likely to be suspended twice as often as students who were white while lighter-skinned Black females did not show the same risk level (Blake et al., 2017). These studies have continued to confirm the high rate of disproportionate outcomes for Black students and provide finer detail on the ages and characteristics of Black students being pushed out.

Exclusionary discipline practices have a greater impact on Black students and include consequences that exclude a student from participating in their regular school schedule (e.g., ISS, OSS, expulsion). Studies have consistently verified disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary discipline for Black students across the United States (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Commonly adopted "zero-tolerance policies" have contributed to these data by causing an increased use of exclusionary discipline, with large numbers of students referred to juvenile court and disproportionate numbers of Black students represented at every level of the system exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallet, 2016).

These discipline practices disrupt a student's learning, causing them to miss instruction, classwork, and socialization with their peers (Skiba et al., 2011) without addressing the inciting event or re-socializing them with their peers. Exclusionary discipline is associated with negative

outcomes, including lower academic achievement (Anderson, 2018), higher rates of school dropouts, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). In the state where this study occurred, students suspended in the ninth grade had lower rates of high school graduation and enrollment in post-secondary education (Anderson, 2018).

Based on the persistence of disproportionate discipline for Black students, researchers have examined numerous causal factors, including poverty, behavior differences among students, and culture. However, studies have failed to find concrete evidence that any of these factors are implicated in discipline disproportionality. When all other factors were controlled for, race still made a significant difference in discipline rates among students (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008).

Policies and School Discipline

Federal policy directly impacts discipline policy in public schools. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 includes two sections that affect student discipline in schools: Title IV and Title VI. Both mandates prohibit discrimination in public schools based on race, color, or national origin and require public schools to enact systems of equity and fairness in discipline policies and practices. More recently, a "Dear Colleague" letter dated January 8, 2014, by the Obama administration outlined two themes that the OCR looks for when investigating claims of discrimination in school discipline, including different treatment and disparate impact based on race.

Despite evidence that these policies resulted in schools changing their discipline policies with positive results, these recommendations were recently revoked (Federal Safety Commission, 2018, p. 67). This decision reduced the ability of OCR to investigate claims of disparate impact in schools and identify patterns of systemic racism, causing them to close 65 investigations without recommendations (CCR, 2019).

State laws influencing this study require schools to track student discipline in a centralized system to inform state policy changes in support of students (Anderson, 2018). These data are reported as the number of student incidents per 100 students for each demographic group and are publicly available ([state] MySchool Info, 2019-2020 data). Each school is also required to craft discipline policies aligned to state guidelines using input from stakeholders, which must be approved by the local school board and filed with the state department each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, the existence of a system translates widely in daily school practices as evidenced by disproportionate data.

The impact of discipline policies and practices in schools can have an effect on disproportionate rates when utilized consistently. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) guidelines encourage schools to look closely at equity with regard to student discipline, and state legislation is increasingly more concerned with that as well. While discipline policies are helpful in that they set the guidelines for what can and cannot be done in schools, it is really the everyday practices that have the most impact on reducing disproportionality when used consistently (Welch & Payne, 2010), which may be a space of uncertainty for principals (Wieczorek & Marand, 2018). Disproportionate treatment of students of color signals a failure to implement ESSA guidelines and address cultural differences among student populations leading to punitive outcomes for students of color due to implicit racial bias (Nance, 2017).

School Characteristics and School Discipline

School characteristics have an impact on disproportionate rates of discipline for Black students. Urban districts have the highest rates of disproportionate exclusionary discipline among students when compared to rural districts and report the highest rates of suspension even when controlling for other factors, such as wealth, district size, or racial composition (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2010; Tajalli & Garba, 2014; Wallace et al., 2008). However, it is unclear if these findings are due to the depth of research in urban districts compared to rural or because there truly are more instances of disproportionate discipline in urban schools (Brushaber-Drockton, 2019).

Racial composition of the student body also impacts disproportionate rates of discipline. Researchers have consistently found that in districts where Black students are the majority, schools tend to use more harsh, punitive consequences; enact more zero-tolerance policies; use less interventions; and have higher rates of exclusionary discipline (Welch & Payne, 2010). Tajalli and Garba (2014) found that as the "whiteness" of a school district increased, so did the discipline rates for Black students. Additionally, one of the strongest predictors of OSS for any student, regardless of gender, school achievement, economic level of the school, or the severity of the student's behavior was attending a school with a higher percentage of Black students (Skiba et al., 2014).

Rural School Discipline

Around 9.3 million students in the U.S. attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019), with approximately half of all school districts classified as rural serving approximately 20% of students in this country (NCES, 2016). Additionally, one-fifth of the nation's rural population identify as people of color (Collins, 2022). Twenty-eight percent of students in the state where this study was enacted attend rural schools (Lavelley, 2018).

Rural schools often struggle with a lack of resources (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Yettick et al., 2014), including well-trained personnel, but less is known about how school discipline manifests in rural school spaces (Brushaber-Drockton, 2019) representing a gap in the literature. Existent studies indicate that rural schools tend to have harsh discipline codes (Harvard Law, 2014); School Resource Officers (SRO's) perceive administrators who are less tolerant of violence, drug use, and gang-related issues (Ruddell & May, 2011); and SRO's have greater authority and discretion in handling student discipline and see their role as putting students in contact with the justice system (Hunt et al., 2019).

Trauma and School Discipline

Lack of cultural competence among teachers contributes to discipline disproportionality, with the cultural mismatch between teacher and student creating a disconnect often leading to negative consequences for the student (Caldera et al., 2019; Weinstein et al., 2004). Classroom management styles of teachers have a significant impact on discipline outcomes for Black students, with teacher responses to student behavior possibly triggering or intensifying student trauma (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Notably, the state where this study was enacted ranks highest in the percent of children who have suffered adverse childhood experiences (ACES) with disproportionate impact, given 61% of Black students experience at least one ACE compared to 40% of white students (Sacks & Murphey, 2018).

Method

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to gain a holistic view of discipline disproportionality in identified rural schools. Data collection occurred in two phases. Phase One focused on the quantitative data, consisting of reported student discipline numbers from each school for one school year. Qualitative data were collected from two rounds of interviews with each principal to further understand each school context in Phase Two.

This study was enacted in five rural schools in a southeastern state within a 100-mile radius of one another and were chosen based on the appearance of disproportionate discipline numbers through publicly available data. School leaders were invited to participate in the study based on their data, and leaders from all five schools accepted the invitation. All schools were within a single geographic region characterized by a declining population and minimal economic growth. The majority of schools in this region serve populations with at least 50% of students receiving free and reduced lunch, and academic performance is significantly lower than other areas of the state. The study participants included the building principal from each of the five schools and one elementary assistant principal, including five white females and one white male, which is representative of the area and the larger profession (Taie & Goldring, 2019).

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through a request from the State Department of Education. These data, entered by each school, included both discipline infractions and actions for the 2017-2018 school year. Discipline Infraction data were categorized by the code that best described the infraction. Discipline Action Taken detailed the action taken by the school authority in response to the infraction. School-level data were provided with disaggregation for each category for race and by grade level.

Qualitative data were collected through two interviews of approximately 60 minutes, held six weeks apart with each principal. The first interview focused on participants explaining their beliefs related to discipline in their school, general information on their current discipline system, and their perception of how rural contexts intersect with school discipline. The second interview focused on questions related to each school's discipline data.

Data Analysis

The total number of infractions and actions for each school was calculated by racial group and overall population based on data obtained from the state. Because of data security, any numbers for student groups where the value was less than ten were not provided in the data set and were noted as restricted values (RV). In these cases, a value of one was substituted for any action or infraction provided as RV. This method allowed the total numbers to be held constant, while providing value for categories with fewer than ten infractions to represent activity. Having close approximations provided valuable insight into which infraction and action codes were being utilized by each school and which categories contained the highest numbers. Following the substitutions in each category for RV, data were analyzed in the categories of infractions and actions and disaggregated by ethnicity.

Composition index scores were calculated for each school to determine the proportion of each racial group comprising the total number of infractions and actions (Nishioka et al., 2017).

Differences in composition index scores were also calculated to determine degree of disproportionality. The composition index was calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{Composition index} = \frac{\textit{Number of discipline incidents for a racial group}}{\textit{Total number of incidents for all students}} \times 100$$

Following calculation of the composition index for infractions and actions within each school by racial group, a relative difference in composition was calculated. This measured the relative difference between infractions in the different racial groups within the entire student population to show degrees of disproportionality. A positive value for a relative difference in composition means that a particular racial group is overrepresented in the number of discipline incidents, while a negative value means the group is underrepresented. The relative difference in composition was calculated using the following equation:
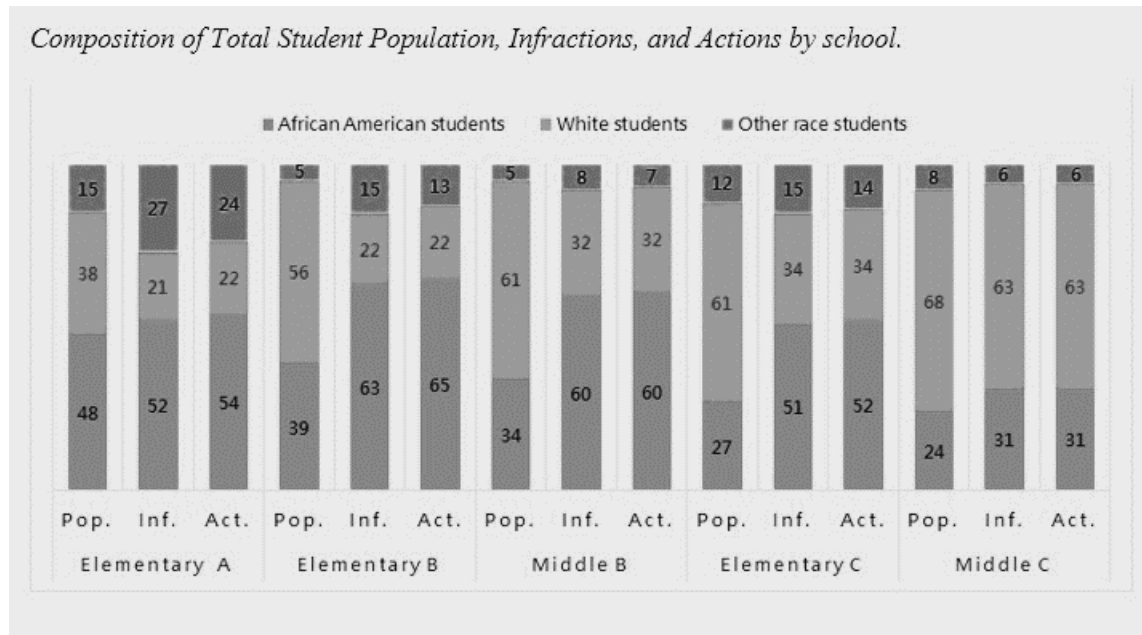
$$\text{Relative difference in composition} = \frac{\textit{Composition of discipline incidents for each racial group - Composition of same racial group in the population}}{\textit{Composition of same racial group in the population}} \times 100$$

For the qualitative data, multiple cycles of coding were conducted using descriptive, emergent coding (Saldana, 2016). Researchers worked in tandem to code the data using joint-probability agreement. Through this process of coding, re-coding, and generating analytic memos, emergent patterns and themes were identified based on first- and second-round coding for each separate school and individual leader as well as overall trends.

Results

Analysis of each school's 2017-2018 data indicated statistically disproportionate discipline in all schools, with Black students overrepresented in discipline infractions and actions. Composition index scores were calculated for each school for the population, infractions, and actions. These percentages provide a basis to compare proportionality of discipline infractions and actions for each race within the student population (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Composition of Total Student Population, Infractions, and Actions by school.

The relative differences in student composition by race based on the number of disciplinary infractions for each school provided a school-specific measure of the level of disproportionality by student racial group proportional to the student population (see Table 1).

Table 1

Relative Difference in Composition of Infractions and Enrollment Composition for Students in All Schools by Race

School	Black students	white students
Elementary A	8.3%	-44.7%
Elementary B	61.5%	-60.7%
Middle B	76.5%	-47.5%
Elementary C	89.7%	-44.3%
Middle C	29.1%	-7.3%

When examining relative differences in composition, the larger the number, the greater the level of observed disproportionality for that student racial group. While Black students were statistically overrepresented in the discipline data for all schools included in the study, some schools had higher disproportionality than others. white students were significantly underrepresented in the number of disciplinary infractions, with the exception of Middle C. This

may be partially explained due to the smaller student population of the school (299) or the fact that the majority of the students at that school are white (68%). Differences in relative composition can be sensitive to group sizes that represent a high or low percentage of the population, which may affect disproportionality rates in these schools (Nishioka et al., 2017).

Differences in composition were also calculated for five of the infraction categories for each school, including Insubordination, Disorderly Conduct, Bullying, Fighting, and Other. These categories were chosen of the twenty-five provided because all schools recorded most of their data in them, and they were likely to signal implicit bias due to their subjective nature (McKintosh et al., 2014). In the subjective categories of Insubordination and Disorderly Conduct, Black students were overrepresented at high rates in four of the five schools (range from 23% - 37% difference).

Composition differences were also calculated for actions, including ISS, OSS, Corporal Punishment, and Other. Most significant here were the differences for ISS, which again showed Black students overrepresented at high rates, ranging from 32% to 39% in four schools, and white students underrepresented at high rates. Middle C had a difference of 6%, which shows overrepresentation for Black students but at a much lower rate than the other schools. The differences for Corporal Punishment also show overrepresentation for Black students, but scores were lower and ranged from 6% to 21%.

Analysis of the composition scores and relative differences in composition data make clear that these schools engaged in discipline practices that contribute to disproportionate discipline and may indicate that implicit bias is a contributing factor in how discipline is managed in these schools.

Qualitative data were collected as the principals responded to their data and discussed their views on student discipline and disproportionality. In the two semi-structured interviews, principals also shared their experiences related to discipline, barriers they faced, and work they were currently engaged in to improve student outcomes. First- and second-round coding led the researchers to define two primary themes, supported by sub-themes, providing insight into two major impact points in disproportionate discipline: the principal and the system (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Major Themes and Sub-Themes Derived from Qualitative Data Analysis
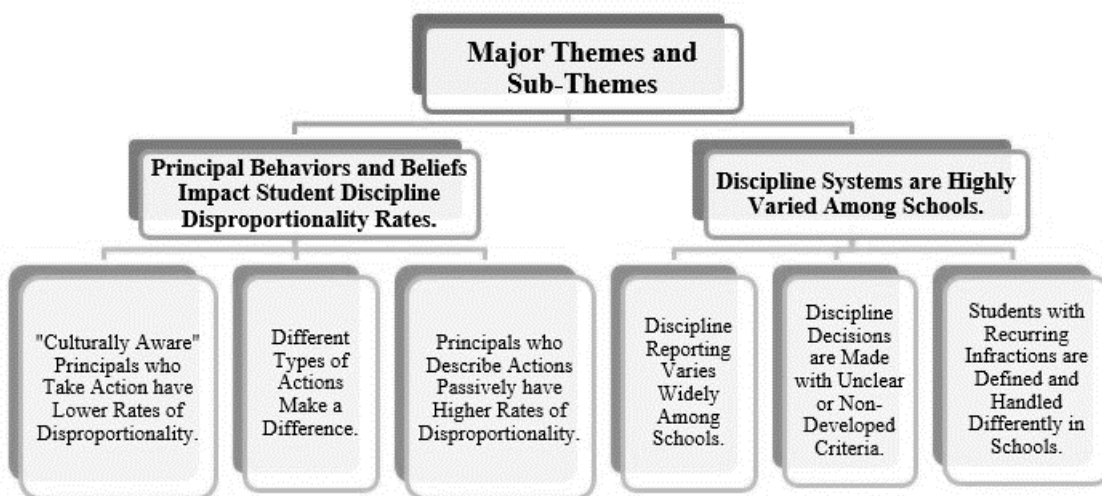
The first major theme identified that principals' behaviors, actions, and beliefs in these rural schools impact their school's discipline disproportionality rates and provided insight into the issue of disproportionate discipline in rural schools. Participant responses were heavy in certain categories and absent in others in ways that mirrored the quantitative data (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

First Major Theme, Sub-Themes, and Codes
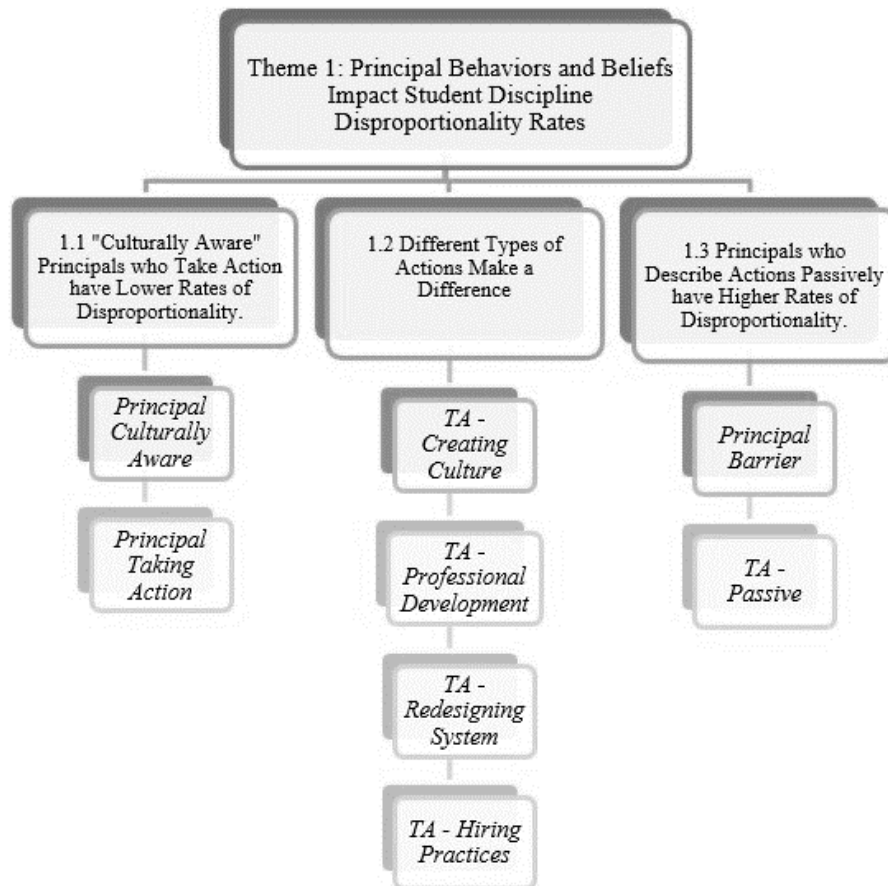
Note. TA=Taking Action

The data indicated that three of the principals in the study were taking measurable actions (Sub-theme 1.2) to meet the needs of their students using an equity frame, including taking some culturally responsive actions (Elementary A, Elementary C, Middle C). These principals were intentional in supporting students based on an exhibited awareness of students' cultures (Sub-theme 1.1). The language from these three leaders generated all responses within the theme *Taking Action - Culturally Aware*, and in these schools the rate of disproportionality was relatively lower when compared to the data of the others. These principals discussed many aspects of culture in their schools, especially related to behavior and respect. Several noted that respect and disrespect meant different things to their Black and white students. One principal, in explaining the difference, noted:

A big thing with our African American males is respect, and if they feel any kind of slighted or disrespect from anybody, teacher or students, they lash out a lot. It's not all of them. It's just those few that have the most social problems, what I call…they don't have the social skills that a lot of kids have. Or they don't have the appropriate social skills that I guess we connect with our culture that's going to be successful.

In contrast, the other three leaders (Elementary and Middle B) used passive language when addressing issues related to culture (Sub-themes 1.2 - 1.3). Their language deflected ownership of discipline disproportionality away from school-based loci of control and provided all the data for the code *Taking Action - Passive*. For example, when asked about the differences between staff and student demographics, these leaders described the issue passively with one leader noting, "Overall we don't spend a lot of time with culture and that kind of thing because we're so focused on teaching reading, writing, and math. We don't make a big deal out of any cultures, really." Notably, the rate of disproportionality in these schools was higher than the others.

In terms of actions taken, principals in schools with lower disproportionate data described specific steps they had taken in hiring practices and creating inclusive school cultures. As one principal noted, "We've actively recruited African-Americans so [the students] see some of the culture in some of our staff members, too. Because if I have ... what is it? 61% white, and 27% African-American, that should reflect in my staff." Another noted, "The big thing about PBIS is changing *our* behavior. The first thing we work on is changing *our* behavior before we start working on changing the behavior of the students." Conversely, principals in schools with higher disproportionality made more passive statements like, "I don't know why [teachers of color] don't apply here. That's something we should be finding out" and "I'm not happy about [discipline disproportionality], but I've never been given an opportunity to do anything about it."

The second major theme that emerged from the data concerned the discipline systems utilized in these schools. Discipline system components included the office referral process, coding, consequences, and data-monitoring. The variability of these systems led to defining the study's second theme with three sub-themes (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Second Major Theme, Sub-Themes, and Codes
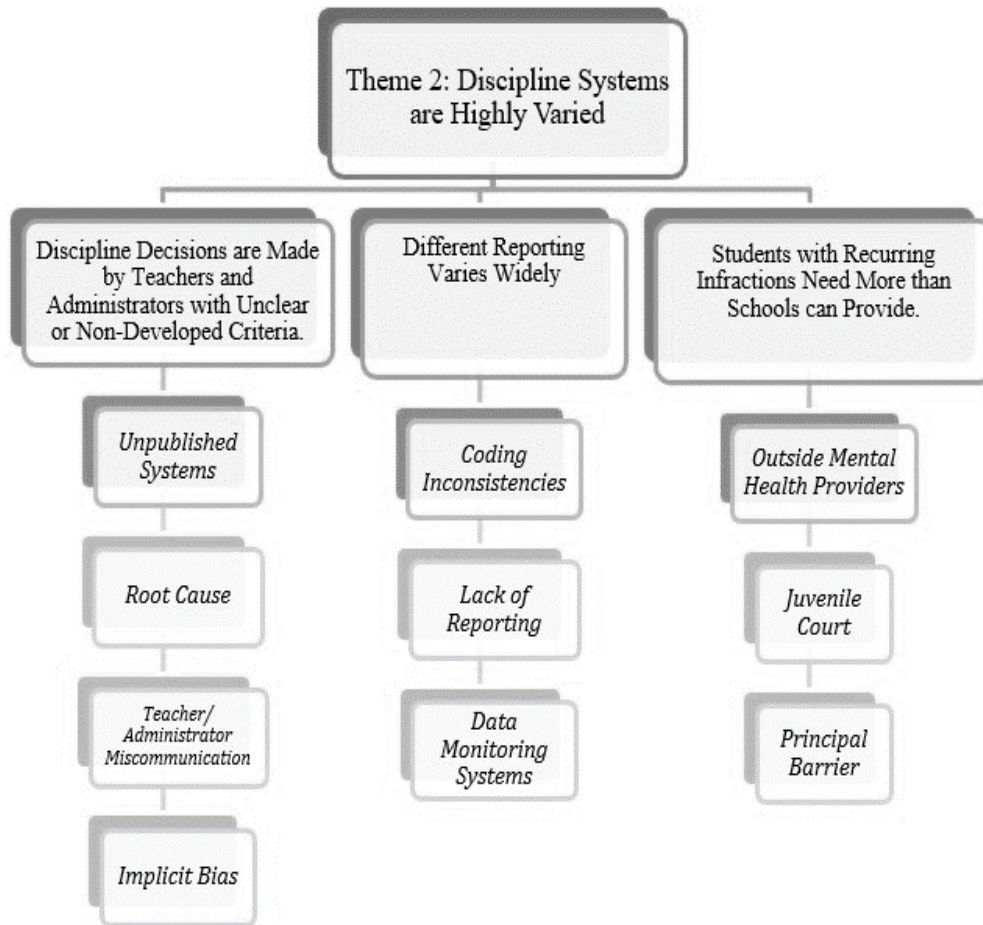
Discipline systems are commonly based on "known" rules principals have used for years and may allow for bias at several leverage points (McKintosh et al., 2014). Although all principals reported that they had discipline policies in their handbooks, they also said they intentionally left them vague to not "tie their hands" (Sub-theme 2.1). Principals reported they did not follow a prescribed series of steps but rather tried to determine the cause of the referral (Sub-theme 2.1). This process at times led to miscommunication between teachers and administrators because the administrators would determine responses to being sent to the office on a case-by-case basis, and teachers wanted something more clear-cut. For example, one principal noted having a school-wide referral form with tiers of offenses on it but that they hadn't really used that part for several years because nobody really understood it.

As a result of the variability in responding to student behavior, the researchers identified that discipline reporting varied widely among schools and districts (Sub-theme 2.2). Principals shared information about how their discipline data codes are determined and assigned internal to the school culture; however, none of the principals were aware of official definitions related to the state discipline codes and instead relied on their own interpretation. Principals gave descriptions of codes for discipline infractions that were often in direct conflict with their recorded data. For

example, one principal stated that they never use the "other" code for infractions because it inhibited the analysis of their data but, upon viewing data, noted that the majority of their infractions had been coded as "other." There was also variability in who was coding the discipline data, which ranged from teachers to the school secretary to the principals themselves. None utilized clear criteria in coding. As for monitoring discipline referrals, the administrators varied from one principal who knew exactly how many referrals they had at the moment and that they were on track to reduce the overall number by 18% for the year, to a principal who relied on his teachers to look at the data. Accordingly, the principal who knew the number of referrals had the lowest rate of disproportionate discipline among students, while the one who relied on teachers to examine data had the highest.

The final sub-theme in this area focused on the students who have multiple discipline referrals within a short period of time (Sub-theme 2.3). Principals reported feeling ill-equipped to handle students with serious behavioral issues and noted about 90% of their office referrals came from 10% of the students. All principals noted they relied on outside mental health providers and the juvenile court system to support these students. Some of these students spent as much time as 54 days in ISS last year, and one principal said she had a student who had more than 30 referrals in a school year. Several principals talked about those with severe problems as being "more than they are trained to handle" in the school.

The confluence of the quantitative and qualitative data for each school allowed the researchers to view the relative differences in compositions and the top recorded codes for each principal (see Table 2).

Table 2

Relative Differences in Composition and Top Recorded Codes Across All Schools

School	AA	W	Top Recorded Codes from Interview Data
Elem A	8.3%	-44.7%	*Taking Action - Professional Development, Taking Action - Redesign System, Impact of Study, Principal Aware of Disproportionality, Taking Action - Creating Culture*
Elem B	61.5%	-60.7%	*Taking Action - Passive, Teacher Barrier, Principal Barrier, Principal Aware of Disproportionality*
Middle B	76.5%	-47.5%	*Principal Barrier, Discipline Reporting, Policy, Taking Action – Passive*
Elem C	89.7%	-44.3%	*Relationships with Families, Relationships with Students, PBIS, Principal Aware of Disproportionality, Taking Action - Creating Culture, Taking Action - Redesign System*
Middle C	29.1%	-7.3%	*Principal Culturally Aware, Taking Action - Creating Culture, Relationships with Students, PBIS, Taking Action - Redesign System*

Note. AA = Black, W = white.

Based on study results, Elementary A had the smallest relative difference for Black students, and top codes revealed a principal who believed in promoting equity and took actions toward that end. Middle B also had lower rates of relative difference for Black students, and top codes indicate a principal with deep knowledge of Black culture and a leadership style based on relationships. The remaining schools had significantly higher relative differences in composition for Black students and were led by principals who described actions passively and were more focused on academics than behavior.

Discussion

The perceptions of the principal can greatly impact a school, given their position of authority to make decisions affecting many students (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2012). Based on data collected in this study, principal perceptions were grouped into three categories to answer this research question with regard to disproportionality: (1) awareness, (2) perceptions of degree, and (3) reactions.

All six leaders were aware of disproportionality by race, specifically mentioning they see Black students more than any other race. However, their depth of reflection on this topic varied widely. At one end of the spectrum was a principal who had been recognized state-wide for reducing discipline disproportionality in her school, while at the opposite end was a leader who had not examined discipline data for the previous six years. The other leaders fell in between, with all but one admitting that they knew their discipline was disproportionate. The exception to this was the principal of Middle C, who stated, "I don't really think my discipline is disproportionate, to be honest." Her feelings were somewhat accurate, as her school data showed the smallest difference in composition scores for Black students of all five schools.

While principals were aware of disproportionate discipline in their schools, they were unaware of the degree to which it existed. The staged composition scores were effective in helping these leaders analyze their data. Several expressed surprise to see such large gaps in composition for each group. One remarked, "I mean, I knew it was disproportionate, but didn't know it was this much disproportionate." Several leaders had an emotional response, expressing dismay and concern. Others responded more analytically, delving into layers that could be impacting rates. These leaders raised many questions in the moment to problem-solve the disproportionality they saw in the data. However, they also acknowledged the complexity of this issue and recognized that solutions would not come easily. Notable in the qualitative data was some principals' lack of action taken to reduce those rates in some of the schools despite their tacit awareness. These findings are consistent with those of DeMatthews et al. (2017) who found that principals who are aware of injustices in their schools do not always work to correct them.

Principals' Discussions of Disproportionality

Principals primarily cited cultural mismatch between teachers and students, followed by student trauma and mental health issues, as the contributing factors most influential in explaining discipline disproportionality, particularly between teachers and students. These leaders noted that the teaching staff in each school did not represent the demographics of the student body; however, only two principals talked about their efforts to recruit a more diverse teaching staff. This finding is consistent with the research base noting the prevalence of a white, female teaching force and

their lack of understanding Black students as a cause of disproportionate rates of discipline in schools (Ferguson, 2001; Townsend, 2000).

Beyond issues of representation, these leaders also indicated teachers had a lack of understanding about the cultures of their students and about their own personal biases. These principals believed some teachers lacked the skills to appropriately handle students in discipline situations, noting teachers yelling at students, triggering outbursts, and intensifying conflict situations with their own behavior. They noted that the classroom management style for some teachers had a significant impact on discipline outcomes for Black students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). However, only one principal of the six interviewed had provided professional development for teachers on cultural responsiveness in the past year.

Several of the principals also mentioned cultural mismatch with regard to the school system itself. From the teaching methods used in the classrooms to the ways educators address misbehavior, some principals identified that school expectations were too far removed from students' home experiences, reflecting the literature base indicating that when students of color encounter school structures based in middle-class norms, this conflict often leads to over-identification of Black students for disabilities, emotional disturbance, and discipline infractions and actions (Donovan & Cross, 2002; CCR, 2019).

Student trauma was another factor in disproportionate discipline rates mentioned by principals. The principals in this study specifically referenced the influence of drug use, addiction, and poverty as trauma triggers experienced by their students, which they felt led to a lack of coping skills, trust, and insecurity.

Several principals mentioned the struggle to find quality mental health help for students, which is likely due to the rural nature of these schools (Frankland, 2021). It was clear that most schools were not equipped to handle the types of serious behaviors they were seeing from students and that few resources were available in their communities. All leaders identified numerous local mental health providers with whom they had built relationships. Juvenile court was also utilized to coax parents into getting help for their child when they were not responding to school requests. Beyond the few mental health providers in the communities and juvenile court, there were no other resources available to assist administrators.

Critical Race Theory

Factors contributing to disproportionate rates of discipline in these schools become more evident in framing the findings using the study conceptual framework: critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefanic, 2011). These factors include the influence of implicit bias, the discipline system, and teacher and administrator training. Principals recognized the school-based discipline systems as creating barriers for students of color. One principal noted that she thought the students were coming to school without the skillset to match "the way we define success in our society." However, as one of the tenets of CRT claims, when current systems advance the interests of whites, many are not interested in changing those systems. It is notable that although the principals were aware their current systems of discipline, including referrals and consequences, caused disproportionality for their Black students, only half of them were actively revising their systems to attempt proportionate outcomes for all students.

Socially constructed views of race could be the root cause of disproportionate discipline rates (Simson, 2014). The comparison of quantitative and qualitative data indicated a cultural mismatch as a root cause of disproportionate data. Because the demographics of the teachers were

so different from the Black students in these schools, misunderstandings due to limited cultural knowledge of the other race lead to conflict. Among the teaching staff in all five schools studied, only eight Black teachers were employed out of the over 200 certified teachers. Principals also noted in interviews that their teachers were mostly "white, middle-class women" and gave examples of cultural mismatch between teachers and students. All of the administrators in the study were white females, with the exception of one white male.

Implicit bias is implicated for its role in disparate rates of discipline for Black students (CCR, 2019). Study findings in the more subjective infraction codes indicate that implicit bias was present. In four of these schools, Black students were overrepresented at high rates for Insubordination and Disorderly Conduct, as evidenced by large composition difference scores. white students were underrepresented in both categories at equally high rates aligning to previous study findings (McIntosh et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002).

Impact of Rurality

The findings in this study provide insight into the state of disproportionate discipline in rural schools in a southern state. The key factors cited by principals causing disproportionality included a cultural mismatch between teachers and staff, as well as students who have experienced trauma and a lack of mental health supports. Common solutions to the issue of disproportionate discipline are often based on findings in large urban and suburban districts, while the rural nature of these schools presents its own set of challenges (Frankland, 2021). Recruiting diverse teaching candidates to come and live in the rural South presents its own set of difficulties, but creating "grow your own" programs for future teachers beginning in high schools is an example of a place-based solution that can help diversify the teaching staff in these schools. Students are often introduced to the teaching profession through introductory courses, and some offer a series of courses that allow high school students to graduate with a Certified Teaching Assistant credential that allows them to become a paraprofessional following graduation and get college credit for their courses. Providing college credit for courses taken in high school and offering incentives to students, such as guaranteed positions in their home district, may be one answer to diversifying the teaching staff and creating a teaching force that is diverse and invested in their rural community.

Students living in rural communities experience ACEs at high rates, likely due to poverty, geographic isolation, and limited access to mental health care (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). As cited by the principals in the study, students often require more services than the school can provide, but specialized services are not often available in their communities due to the rurality of locations. Providing trauma-informed, social-emotional support in schools is a place where schools can begin to support their students at the youngest ages. Using trauma-informed practices as a lens for social-emotional learning can benefit all students, including those who have not experienced trauma (Frankland, 2021). Building on the strengths of rural schools, including the deep connections that residents have to one another and the central focus the school provides in the community, can also be part of the solution in supporting students. Empowering the school staff and community to work together in providing positive youth programs, creating awareness around trauma-informed practices, and involving community members in generating solutions have all been found to have positive benefits on students in rural communities (Frankland, 2021).

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations in the study include the sensitive nature of the phenomenon studied. Because the focus of this study involved race and implicit bias, qualitative data collected may not reflect the administrators' true beliefs. The study is also limited by changes that occurred related to school discipline at the federal, state, and local levels during the course of the study. Guidance from the federal level requiring schools to examine their discipline data for disparate impact was revoked during the course of the study, causing some confusion for schools as to where they should focus their efforts. Delimitations include the small sample of principals that were interviewed and schools selected for the study. Finally, the inability to track data by student to identify the influence of students with recurring infractions is a delimitation. These constraints limit generalizability of the study.

Implications

The findings in this study provide guidance for professional practice, calling for schools to establish clearly defined systems for discipline referrals that minimize opportunities for subjective decision-making. Schools also need access to transparent and easily navigable systems for regularly monitoring student discipline data for disparate effects on groups of students (McIntosh et al., 2014). Training in implicit bias and culturally-responsive practices for staff is critical for decreasing disproportionate rates of discipline (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018). Principals need ongoing professional development in using and disaggregating data to support school improvement, starting in their principal preparation program. They also need specific training on disparate impact, training in implicit bias and culturally-responsive practices, and support in understanding how to advocate for social justice (DeMatthews, 2016). Training future school leaders in the implementation of restorative practices systems, which focus on teaching students to repair the harm they have caused, as well as a focus on teaching students expected behaviors rather than applying punitive consequences, is also necessary.

To more completely understand the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline for students in rural schools, this study should be replicated in other contexts. Replication should include other regions and school contexts to examine patterns of impact that principals can have on discipline disproportionality and to measure effects of systems put into place to address it. Additional methods to explore this issue should also be included to expand this study, such as adding qualitative data sources (e.g., focus groups of teachers, parents, and students) and staging a longitudinal study based on specific interventions.

Conclusion

      This study examined the problem of practice found in the disproportionate rate of student discipline for Black students compared to white students in rural schools in a southeastern state. The study findings concluded that Black students were being disciplined at much higher rates than their white counterparts in rural schools, likely due to implicit bias. Principal responses to these data indicated that principals who were culturally aware of the student diversity in their respective schools and took specific, concrete actions to ensure equity for all students were most successful in reducing rates of disproportionate discipline. These actions included training their staff to be aware of implicit bias and utilizing culturally responsive and trauma-informed discipline practices, as well as actively cultivating a diverse teaching staff to represent the cultures of their students. This study points to a need for clear, objective discipline systems in schools that minimize the impact of implicit bias, as well as for targeted principal development.

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