REDEFINING THE DISCIPLINE GATEKEEPER: A MIXED METHOD ANALYSIS OF URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

by

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ABSTRACT

JOHN ANDREW WILLIAMS III. Redefining the Discipline Gatekeeper: A Mixed Method Analysis of Urban Middle School Assistant Principals. (Under the direction of DR. CHANCE W. LEWIS).

African American students, despite over four decades of research and reports, still receive the highest percentage of school discipline infractions (i.e., office referrals, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement) than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Isolating and replicating solutions to this inequitable condition requires that researchers investigate specific points along the disciplinary pathway (i.e., from the incident in the classroom, to the student being sent to the school office, to the prescription of the discipline outcome), so to determine who if anyone can help to reduce or prevent unnecessary school discipline outcomes for African American students. The purpose of this mixed method study is to explore the role, development, and disciplinary practices of assistant principals; as their authority and power gives them ability to recommend interventions at their discretion. This research illuminates three significant findings: 1) assistant principals are often viewed as inconsistent enforcers of discipline for African American students; 2) assistant principals' role as disciplinarians are influenced by internal and external factors; and 3) according to principals, to be effective at reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices, student-centered mentorship is required in conjunction with a personal aspiration to provide culturally inclusive interventions for African American students.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Walter and Gary Hughes, my grandparents who poured into me the value of an education at an early age. This is also dedicated to my mother, Marilyn Hughes, whose sacrifices paved the way for me to accomplish anything in life. Lastly, this is dedicated to my wife Shannaya who found this doctoral program and supported my lifelong dream; to my brother Matthew who inspired me to take a chance of a lifetime; and my two daughters Soledad and Domino, who push me every day to be a better version of myself.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For African American students, the U.S. public education system has failed to adequately reform practices and policies to address the systemic disproportionality in school discipline outcomes (Gagnon, Gurel, & Barber, 2017; Hoffman, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014; Walker, 2014; Wiley et al., 2018). The most recent U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights Database (OCRD) snapshot found that for the 2015-2016 academic year, African American students had the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions when compared to every other racial/ethnic group. OCRD (2018) reports that African American students are 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more suspensions when compared to White students in K-12 settings. While previous studies emphasize that the trend of harsh penalization for African American students is just an issue in elementary, middle and high schools (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017; Marchbanks, Blake, Booth, Carmichael, Seibert, & Fabelo, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014), the recent OCRD findings point out that this is no longer the case, as "African American preschool students are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspension as White preschoolers" (OCRD, 2018, p.3). The long-standing trend of discipline inequities for African American students has garnered up specific phrases such as the school-to-prison pipeline (STTP) which are the policies, rules, practices by school personnel that promotes exclusionary discipline practices, and channels students into the juvenile and adult penal systems (Losen, 2013; Mallett, 2017); and the discipline gap which is defined as the difference in the frequency or rate that African American students experience school discipline consequences when compared to White students (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, Gerewitz, 2016; Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). While these terms

could be considered negative outcomes, they are actually symptoms of larger interconnected factors within U.S. schools.

School discipline encompasses a multitude of interrelated points which include code-of-conduct policies and philosophies, classroom management styles, the curriculum, the delivery of content, teacher preparation, and administrator dispositions (Bryan, 2017; Payne, Rocco, Miller, & Salmon, 2014). These previously mentioned points for African American students have served to alienate rather than redirect; oppress rather than empower; and subjugate African American students to harsher penalties based often on subjective decisions by certain school personnel. Prior to being excluded from learning opportunities as the result of an in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), or expulsion, African American students' behaviors are often overly scrutinized by a primarily White, female, middle-class teacher workforce (Landsman & Lewis, 2012). While the race of the teacher is not the sole predictor of discipline, studies have found that African American students experience deficit-based ideologies, implicit and explicit biases more when they are instructed by a White teacher as compared to a teacher of color (Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987; Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Consequentially, these conscious and unconscious beliefs towards African American students are made visible through the disproportionate number of office discipline referrals (ODRs) given based on subjective offenses such as disrespect, defiance, unengaged (Girvan et al., 2017), and objective offenses like being in possession of drugs, violence at school, in possession of a weapon, theft, and truancy (Forsyth, Biggar,

Forsyth, & Howat, 2015). Still, regardless of the offense, African American students are funneled to one centralized location - the main office.

While certain findings have highlighted that the initial ODR is responsible for accelerating African American students' trajectory towards additional ODRs, an ISS, OSS or expulsion (Fabelo et al., 2011; Massar, McIntosh, & Eliason, 2015; Payne & Welch, 2010; Predy, McIntosh, & Frank, 2014; Spaulding et al., 2010), the referral from the teacher still requires a school administrator's consent, which can prevent a student from traversing down any of those paths. Although the assumption is that principals dictate the culture of the school and the policy of school discipline, in reality, assistant principals (APs) are responsible for managing conflict that involves students in and around the school building. Several studies have noted that of all the responsibilities that APs must contend with on a daily basis, it is student discipline that absorbs a large portion of their day (Barnett, Soho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Glanz, 1994; Sun, 2011). Thus, it is of critical importance to not only reform discipline practices of teachers, but to draw much needed attention to the role of APs (e.g., how they interpret policy, affirm or deny ODRs, and their rational behind selecting specific discipline interventions) in perpetuating discipline disproportionality for African American students. Without acknowledging APs' relationship to the discipline process, we as critically conscious educators cannot begin to recommend solutions that target the STTP or the discipline gap (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016).

As an introductory chapter, the following literature review is devoted to explicating the long-established connection between school discipline (i.e., specifically the frequent use of OSSs) in the U.S. and African American students; highlighting the

importance of middle school as a discipline hot spot; and exploring the position of AP as a front line, student-to-teacher and student-to-student conflict manager. After the review, the proposed theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the individual studies - Institutional Theory, Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive School Leadership - are discussed. This discussion is followed by the individual research designs/questions.

Review of Literature

African Americans and School Discipline

Over the last four decades, researchers, policymakers, teachers and school administrators have all witnessed the debilitating effects that school discipline practices have on African American students (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Cobb-Clark, Kassenboehmer, Le, McVicar, & Zhang, 2015; Marchbanks et al., 2015; Martin, Sharp-Grier, & Smith, 2016; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Townsend, 2000). In the seminal report, *School Suspensions: Are They Helping?,* the Children's Defense Fund (1975) accentuated the first documented analysis that articulated the negativity surrounding suspensions for students, and revealed the discriminant usage of suspensions towards African American students. The findings from this national study of 1970 U.S. Census data highlighted how schools created mechanisms to exclude African American students such as unfair discipline policies. Additionally, there were few procedures to ensure transparency when dispensing discipline, and little if any processes that allowed educators to adequately gather facts regarding the discipline incident in question (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Additionally, the report calls to attention how a suspension can result in the unnecessary removal of students, the loss of instructional time for students, few actions to help mediate the actions of students or

teachers, and how a suspension for a student can result in them dropping out of school permanently (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). This report informed policy makers, education stakeholders, parents, and community members of the devastating effects of school suspensions.

The inequitable application of school discipline policies towards African American students is visible through the existence of a disproportionate number OSSs, and the inordinate number of ODRs given based on often non-violent/subjective offenses such as defiance, missed class, disruption, etc. (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016). Numerous studies have found that often many teachers devalue African American students and their culture before the students step foot into classroom, and this devaluation causes teachers to have lower expectations and view African American students as displaying more behavior problems than their White peers (Bryan, 2017; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). These factors coupled with the resounding evidence that teachers, regardless of tenure, have indicated that classroom management continues to be an area requiring constant improvement (Kee, 2011; Watson, 2006), creates an environment that enables the exclusion of African American students from learning opportunities, which increases the possibility of the student being suspended if they are perceived to be misbehaving in the future.

The over-reliance of ODRs by school personnel has emerged as a pattern and brought about the unfortunate criminalization and adultification (e.g., the perception that African American youth older than what they appear and are undeserving of childhood innocence) of African American students (Birckhead, 2017). This pattern is often referred

to as STPP. In short, the STPP is a series of events that operationalizes the criminalization of students' misbehaviors based on moral and authoritative imperative to perpetuate a punitive climate based on domination (Hirschfield, 2008; Losen, 2013). Students are processed through several decision points within the education system (e.g., the recommendation of the ODR from the teacher, to the recommendation of an OSS or expulsion from the school entirely based on the APs suggestion), and this propels students into situations such as being involved with negative peer spaces, dropping out of school, drug and substance abuse, etc. (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hemphill, Heerde, Herrenkohl, Toumbourou, & Catalano, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2014). The culminating impact of school discipline decisions further exposes students to future involvement in the juvenile and adult justice system (Walden & Losen, 2003, 2007).

Research over multiple decades has found evidence that having just one OSS can negatively impact a student's academic performance, social and cognitive development, and decrease a student's level of trust or engagement with school personnel (Girvan et al., 2017; Kirk, 2009; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughin, 2015). Attempts to remedy this national systemic issue in public education has resulted in a number of reactive and proactive attempts to refine teacher education programs. Efforts have focused on exposing teacher candidates to culturally responsive/sustaining field experiences and coursework, providing professional development seminars on culturally responsive classroom management techniques, instituting district-wide and individual school code-of-conduct policies that are inclusive to the needs of students, and allowing non-instruction school personnel (e.g., mentors, school counselors, etc.) to become more

involved with supporting African American students and school personnel (Cameron, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Slider, Noell, & Williams, 2006).

Despite efforts to reduce OSS and ODRs, disparities still exist. African Americans students were 2.6 times as likely to be suspended at the dawn of the 21st century (Wald & Losen, 2003); a trend that continues to exist into this present day. As of the 2015-2016 academic year, which is the most recent publicly available national data provided by OCRD, African Americans in K-12 educational settings were 3.8 times as likely to receive an OSS when compared to their White peers (OCRD, 2018). When disaggregating the instances of OSS for African American students, further trends become apparent between genders. Overall, only six percent of K-12 students received an OSS, however, 18% of that total were African American males, and 10% was African American females. Additionally, the data indicated that African American females make up only eight percent of the K-12 total enrollment, yet they receive 13% of the OSS dispensed which is more than their White female peers. Although these numbers reflect national inequities throughout the K-12 education system, there are a number of studies (Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Kennedy, Murphy, & Jordan, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014) which focus on the difficulties that middle school personnel encounter when addressing the equitable enforcement of discipline interventions for African American students.

Discipline in Middle Schools

Middle school serves as a pivotal timeframe for a student's social, emotional, and academic development. A student's academic performance during this period can potentially make a lasting impression on their high school, collegiate, and post collegiate endeavors (Balfanz, 2009; The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk &

George W. Bush Institute., 2016). It is throughout the academic phase of middle school that students encounter higher rates of exclusive discipline consequences when compared to K-5 settings (Gagnon, Jaffee, & Kennedy, 2016; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Spaulding et al., 2010; Sprague et al., 2001). Upon a closer examination of middle schools and discipline in a large, urban Midwestern public school district, Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) found that the schools in their sample (n = 11,001 students) referred 40% of their students, and the majority of those ODRs received were due to their students' inability to portray respect or obedience to their teachers. Anti-authoritative social stances by students in middle school is not a new concept as middle school students are typically adjusting to new peer social groups and peer influences, and this forces middle school students at times to exert measures of resistance towards teachers (Pennington, 2009). Problematic behaviors for elementary school students are traditionally directed at peers, however, Spaulding et al. (2010) found that commonly, the issue of problematic behaviors for middle school students resulted in more student-to-adult conflict. Although these actions of resistance by middle students are just a part of their natural appropriate development as adolescent individuals, Skiba et al. (1997) suggest that the consequences linked to students' actions may represent a school personnel's inability to effectively redirect or contend with these issues in the classroom. What further complicates teachers' ability to ascertain if a students' behavior is normal is that often teachers and other school personnel tend to automatically perceive African American students as uncooperative (Hughes, 2011). This aspect makes school personnel prone to remove African American students based on the subjective interpretation of behaviors (e.g., defiance, disrespect, etc.).

For many African American students, instead being allowed to fully maximize their academic potential throughout middle school, African American students are forced to endure the inequitable enforcement of code-of-conduct policies based on teachers' different styles of classroom management. A segment of research concerning the topic of school discipline and classroom management has focused on improving the student-to-teacher relationship (Gregory et al., 2016; Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Pence, 2011). Traditionally, teacher education programs in the past emphasized to new and veteran teachers that the most effective method to managing the classroom was to control students through rules, order, domination, and fear (Baumrind, 1978), however, recent efforts by some teacher education programs and researchers in the last 15 years have urged teachers to use more student-centered approaches that rely on trust and relationship building (Gregory et al., 2016; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Concepts such as culturally responsive classroom management (Brown 2009; Durden et al., 2015; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), and restorative practices have begun to reframe how teachers provide instructional content, all while affirming students in a manner than promotes collaboration during behavior redirection (Bazemore & Schiff, 2010; Payne & Welch; 2013; Sugai & Horner, 2009). Still, regardless of the efforts to enact the aforementioned concepts, schools whose racial composition is comprised of mostly African American students enforce harsher discipline practices more often than schools where African Americans are the demographic minority (Payne & Welch, 2011, 2013). These findings suggest that the promotion of school discipline inequities extend far beyond the teacher-to-student relationship and into the student-to-school administrator relationship.

Assistant Principals as Disciplinary Gatekeepers

While principals of middle schools orient much of their own responsibilities towards supporting teachers' pedagogical development and improving curriculum deployment, APs spend the majority of their day interpreting school policies, investigating student misconduct, and recommending interventions for the alleged behavior based on their own discretion (Berlin, 2009; Bottoms, O'Neill, Fry, & Hill, 2003; Glanz, 1994; Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). Although APs serve in a critical position in regards to school discipline in middle schools (Austin & Brown, 1970; Harvey, 1994), few studies have explicated the intricacies of the factors (i.e., effective dispositions, styles of conflict management, and interpersonal communication, etc) that can define how APs approach their responsibilities as disciplinarians (Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2013). This trend seems to extended beyond novice APs, as Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski found that even experienced APs felt underprepared to handle the daily responsibilities of managing conflict between students and teachers (2012). Furthermore, as APs transition from the role of teacher into a role that bestows upon them a greater level of power and authority, they bring with them the same beliefs, biases, into their new administrator position (Williams, 2012). This aspect, coupled with findings that suggest that new APs enter into their positions without the proper knowledge and dispositions to effectively manage conflict, it is quite possible that their management style as it relates to administering school discipline interventions is counterproductive to school-wide efforts to minimize unnecessary OSS for African American students.

There are only a few studies (Armstrong, 2015; Smith & Hains, 2012) that have expounded on how APs' experiences as teachers and their training within their educational leadership programs have shaped their ability to investigate and recommend appropriate discipline interventions while minimizing internal and external biases. This is important, because often APs are inserted into demanding situations that require them to act quickly to minimize conflict, all while trying to thoroughly investigate the events that led up to the student's removal from class. This quick timeframe often leaves little, if any time for them reflect and analyze the situation, determine if racial biases were at play before and during the situation, and create an effective approach to addressing their own, or the teacher's biases in a timely manner. Consequentially, impactful learning opportunities for the student are obstructed, without a clear delineation of how APs came to the conclusion of recommended discipline outcome. To confront discipline inequities, it is imperative that the position of AP be analyzed so to determine what factors APs rely on (e.g., prior school discipline data, recommendations by the teacher, prior student behavior, school policy, school staffing, etc.) when deciding whether to remove a student from class or school entirely. Additionally, are the factors that influence an APs decision different when an African American student is the offending party?

Theoretical Frameworks

Institutional Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Culturally Responsive School Leadership will be employed in a conjunctive manner. APs are uniquely positioned at the threshold of power, authority, and influence with interpersonal relationships with students, teachers, the larger community, and their principal. APs are continually required to balance organization policies and culture while attending to the needs of racially and

culturally diverse students in urban schools. How APs establish their narrative or counter narrative for their decisions pertaining to school discipline, requires further examination from multiple theoretical and conceptual lenses.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory asserts that as a societal structure, organizations are comprised of multiple institutions. Institutions develop social norms, values, and practices that are accepted by members of the institutions (Scott & Mitchell, 1987). Institutions reform their social norms, values, and practices solely based on the need to evolve and survive the societal pressures and changes that threaten the organization's existence (Scott, 1987). This framework realizes that while organizations are institutions, it is plausible that the organization itself can be comprised of multiple micro institutions. The members within the micro institutions typically adhere to rules and practices because of their willingness to maintain the social order within the organization; however, some organizations are reformed internally or dismantled due to a select group of members resisting the need to conform to the organization's rules, by creating their own social norms, rules, and practices (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2016).

As an institution, schools serve the function of preparing individuals to become productive citizens in society and situating individuals to maintain or improve upon their social mobility. Discipline in schools is designed as a mechanism to support teachers and administrators as a way of sanctioning students who attempt to subvert learning opportunities for themselves or others (Cameron, 2006). While the overarching discipline policies and school rules guide teachers and school administrators on the use of certain discipline interventions, the enforcement of these policies differs based on the different

responsibilities and pressures that are exerted on both groups. The teacher responds primarily to the pressures that exist in the classroom, yet school administrators must respond to the needs of the teacher, the needs of the student, the direction of district administrators, and the requests or demands by the guardians of the student. School administrators are required to contend with multiple pressures to ensure that their school, as an organization, functions properly and exists in the midst of multiple internal and external challenges.

The relationship between the two parties sets up a situation or situations where school administrators must construct their own set of institutional practices concerning school discipline, which could possibly be at odds with the practices that teachers believe their school administrators should abide by. As beliefs in institutional norms intersect, it establishes the possibility that teachers will conform to the institutional practices that administrators enact regarding school discipline for African American students. Adversely teachers could resist the practices prescribed to them by school administrators, while retaining their own set of practices, rules, and social norms. Regardless of either situation, far too often African American students are held hostage between the intra-institutional politics occurring between teachers and school administrators. In the context of the first study, the aims are to determine if teachers' perceptions of their school administrators' enforcement of school rules can predict out-of-school suspensions for middle school African American students, and to ascertain if teachers find their school administrators to be consistent with enforcing school discipline overall.

Critical Race Theory

Central to any discussion or analysis regarding the reformation of school discipline practices and policies as it pertains to African American students is the social construct known as race. The failure to account for race and its oppressive iterations (i.e., racism, prejudice, bias, discrimination, micro-aggression, etc.) reduces any substantive effort to create policies and practices within education that promote the inclusion of African American students. Because school discipline inequities for African American students have not been rectified, it is important to examine this issue utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT). Scholar Derrick Bell initially brought forth this theoretical framework to address racial inequities and disparities that existed in every part of the U.S. legal system (Bell, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1995). In critiquing critical legal theory, Bell and other scholars (Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1987) asserted that when examining these disparities, it is futile to critique the actions of individuals concerning race and racism in isolation; rather scholars suggested that the correct analysis should focus on the structural systems themselves, and how each system weaponizes race against marginalized groups.

The essence of this critical analysis about race and racism was captured and transitioned into the field of education by scholars seeking to challenge and redefine the power that race and racism held in education, and examine how individual components within education (e.g., teacher preparation, school curriculum, instruction, assessment, desegregation, school funding, etc.) continue to preserve inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Delgado, 2001). From their examination, five sailable tenets emerged:

(1) In the U.S., race and racism are endemic to everyday life because each item resides in every conceivable U.S. structure (Bell, 1984, 1992).

(2) The current structure of race has created a caste like society that inheritably promotes the dominance of Whiteness (i.e., white privilege and white supremacy) in the U.S. It is these structures that prioritize Whiteness while oppressing and marginalizing groups of color. These structures cannot be pronounced as neutral systems. The promotion of falsehoods such as liberalism and meritocracy give credence that individual effort always results in success, without examining the systemic inequities of institutional racism. This ignores the multitude of systems that only promote progressive rights for individuals of color, solely based on the convergence of interests for Whites (Bell, 1988).

(3) Far too often, the singular propagandized narratives of Whites are viewed as truth, which silences people of color. Counter-narratives and the experiential knowledge that individuals of color have are central to preserving an inclusive history, and it challenges the color-blindness within the U.S. that seeks to mask the effects of race and racism (Ladson Billings, 1999).

(4) Attempts to expose and counteract racism cannot be done solely by one group. Rather, it requires an interdisciplinary perspective, which analyzes how race influences a wide array of aspects in the U.S. (e.g., gender, sexual identity, age, class, etc.). Limiting the impact of race on the lives of individuals requires multiple disciplines to converge and undermine the traditional ahistorical approach to understanding race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

(5) Eliminating race as a tool for marginalization and oppression requires that advocates and scholars utilize a social justice framework. From this perspective,

> the goal is to remove every form of oppression that exists, regardless of who is being oppressed (Solórzano & Delgado, 2001).

The persistence of race as a distinctive indicator in education and educational outcomes serves as a constant reminder that any and all efforts to correct any disparities must continue to; (1) situate how race affects systems and individuals; and (2) explore how multiple systems interact to influence an individual's attainment because of their race. For the purposes of the study conducted in Chapter II, CRT is used to deconstruct how the racial identity of African American students and individuals' own racial identity are nestled into the fabric of individuals' maturation as APs. Additionally, this theoretical framework will serve as a lens to understand if the tenets of interdisciplinary approaches, experiential knowledge, and the removing color/race blindness are being utilized in APs' discipline practices.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Literature has long validated the importance of affirming students of color, particularly African American students through pedagogically rich practices in education (Gay, 2002a, 2002b, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy require that teachers expand their conceptual understanding of their students, the unique cultures that students bring with them to class, and develop inclusive practices, lessons, and curriculum that engage all students. While Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy is attuned to raise teachers' awareness that students of color bring affirmative attributes and cultural capital to the classroom (1995); Gay's culturally responsive pedagogy challenges teachers to extend themselves beyond just witnessing the importance of students of color and their culture in society. Culturally responsive

teaching urges teachers to co-construct with students the curricula and lesson plans in an effort to harnesses students' culture and engage them at multiple cognitive levels.

Where Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) comes into existence is that it captures the essence of both Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant and Gay's culturally responsive pedagogy and infuses both onto the profession of school administrators. While Ladson-Billings and Gay do not directly construct their frameworks to include school administrators, both indirectly set the stage for CRSL by indicating that culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy cannot solely rest on the backs of teachers working with African American students. Rather these conceptual frameworks it must go beyond the classroom and become a core component of a school's culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2002a, 2010, 2014). CRSL as a conceptual framework is emerging and being utilized to examine the qualities and characteristics of school administrators, particularly those individuals who occupy positions in urban schools (Khalifa, 2013). As it relates school leadership, the days have long passed where educational leadership programs can manufacture principals or assistant principals that are deaf to the cultural, social, economic and political influences that mold the conditions of urban schools (Johnson, 2007).

Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) offer a robust explanation of CRSL and provide several definable characteristics of a school administrator practicing CRSL. Khalifa et al. indicated that school administrators must examine and evaluate policies, practices and procedures at their school, to determine if the existence of these items are in direct or indirect opposition to the diverse student body that they are charged with educating (2016). Particularly, school leaders exhibiting CRSL behaviors are

attentiveness to anti-racist beliefs and actions, have a commitment to a social justice praxis, are willing to develop teachers and staff to become inclusive of students from all backgrounds, are dedicated to incorporating innovative practices that are in response to a continuously shifting student demographic, and are committed to incorporating community members and stakeholders with the schools' operations (Johnson, 2007; Khalifa, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Although CRSL as a framework has examined the overall preparedness of school administrators, scholars have typically used it to frame the actions and behaviors of school administrators as instructional leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). For the purposes of the study in Chapter IV, CRSL is employed to explore the responses of four principals regarding their experiences as disciplinarians, during their tenure as an assistant principal at an urban middle schools with a large African American student population. Specifically, it is the participants' experiences as school disciplinarians and actions within these experiences which will be investigated using this conceptual framework in attempt to determine who or what helped transform the participants into culturally responsive school leaders.

Dissertation Overview and Guiding Research Questions

The overarching purpose of this research is to deconstruct the position of AP as a disciplinary gatekeeper (i.e., individuals who have the power and the legal authority to recommend interventions for discipline infractions based on their own interpretation of school code-of-conduct policies); to gather a stronger understanding of the internal and external factors which promulgate individuals' resiliency to undertake the responsibilities of position in urban schools; and to begin to reimagine how APs can become better

prepared to effectively support African American students middle school through three distinct, yet interrelated studies. As the introductory study, Chapter II investigates the relationship between middle school teachers' responses about their school administrators from a state-wide administered survey using a quantitative research design. Chapter II, employs a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to determine if teachers' responses regarding how consistent their school administrators (i.e., principals and APs) are with enforcing school rules, can predict the risk of an African American students receiving an OSS.

To compliment Chapter II, the following two chapters utilize qualitative phenomenological methodology and a constant comparison analysis to investigate the experiences and beliefs of APs and principals independently. Chapter III explores the philosophies, perspectives, and dispositions of five APs as it relates to African American middle school students, how they manage interpersonal and sometimes interracial relationships with students and teachers, and how they were prepared by their educational leadership program to lead in urban school settings. This particular study focuses on five APs in two separate urban middle schools, whose disciplinary practices have evolved to reduce the number of suspensions for African American students in the past four years. The guiding questions for this study are, what concepts and items (e.g., theoretical and conceptual frameworks obtained through formal schooling and professional development, versus daily interactions with students, staff, etc.) do APs utilize to interpret student discipline policies; and what main factors influence the type of discipline interventions prescribed for African American students by APs?

Whereas Chapter II focuses on teachers' perspective of administrators (i.e., principals and APs) and Chapter III investigates APs' inspection of their personal and professional development as enforcers of school-wide discipline policies in urban schools; Chapter IV examines how four, urban middle school principals who held the position of AP previously, view the position itself and the requisite skills needed to be effective with managing conflict and student discipline. The guiding questions for this study are; how do principals regard the position of AP as disciplinarians; and what experiences with African American students shaped their understanding and application of discipline practices as an AP? Collectively, these studies attend to the growing need to further understand how the positionality of APs directly impacts school discipline culture and policy. Furthermore, these chapters act as a potential conduit for the examination of APs' impact on African American students' academic success in urban middle schools. As the final section, Chapter V offers a conclusion that unveils individual and collective relevant findings, recommendations for future studies and a closing thought about the state of school discipline for African American students and APs.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

There are a number of limiting factors among the collective studies which could reduce generalizability of the results. Chapter II examines schools from five school districts based on secondary data school discipline data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights Database and the North Carolina statewide administered Teacher Working Condition Survey from the 2015 - 2016 academic year. How school discipline data is collected and reported to state and federal agencies could differ by individual school, based on the guidelines provided by each local education

administration. Lastly, the time at which the survey was administer is important. The survey is administered during April. This time of the year is highly stressful, as teachers are consciously ramping up their instructional methods to prepare students for the End of the Grade (EOG) testing. Potentially, the combination of the added stress and exposure to administrators' school discipline practices could skew how teachers rate their administrators on the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey.

A limitation in Chapter III and IV exists in the inability to produce results which extend beyond the participating school, APs, and principals in the study. Moreover, each participant that was interviewed is currently employed in, or have previously been employed in an urban school, whose racial demographic consisted primarily of African American students. One aspect that can strengthen the quality of the last two studies is the ability to conduct multiple interviews with participants throughout the entire academic year. This process would allow triangulation from multiple data collection points, and possibly reveal an evolving perspective based on their increased school workload.

Critical to each study are the delimitations which serve as a filter. As there are few studies that examine the positionality of administrators in urban schools, these studies specifically address the role of APs, as they primarily dispense discipline outcomes and manage conflict in the school. Chapter II specifically focused on readily available OSSs, while purposefully choosing to exclude other forms of discipline interventions (e.g., in-school suspensions, expulsions, community service, etc.). Although these interventions could bolster the studies' findings, the reported number of these instances are traditionally fewer than OSS at the selected schools. Furthermore, OSSs

typically produce the largest amount of lost instructional time for students because of how long a student can be suspended for.

Subjectivity Statement

Critical to the analysis within each of the studies is my positionality as an African American male who spent a considerable amount of time working with African American students in non-traditional P-12 settings. Some of those experiences center around assisting African American students in middle and high school with obtaining access to programs to enhance academic achievement. Sadly, most of my experience concerns the of delivery educational services for African American youth who were disenfranchised either by their school or family, and have found themselves under the supervision of the juvenile or adult criminal justice system. Although these experiences have galvanized my efforts to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, it was imperative that my experiences, beliefs, dispositions towards school officials, and perspectives on school discipline practices not cloud how data was collected or analyzed. Still, the experiences that propelled me to analyze school discipline disparities for African American students are the same experiences that created an emphatic connection with the participants in Chapter III and Chapter IV – an important feature when trying illicit rich experiences from participants.

Key Terms

To provide clarity regarding current study, the subsequent terms have been provided:

African American/Black Students – Students whose cultural and racial background identifies with the continent of African or is of African descent (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Assistant Principal – Also known as the dean of students, vice principal, or any other respective title which refers to an individual under the supervision of the school's principal, who is responsible for overseeing school discipline practices and policies (Oleszewski et al., 2012).

Critical Race Theory (within Education) – a theoretical framework which analyzes the existence and persistence of race and racism in structures, in the collective and individual decisions of members of society, and promotes the elimination of oppression and subservience (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Culturally Relevant Teaching – the ability for educators to engage students, cross culturally, by appreciating their strengths and accomplishments and embedding the students' cultural references in the intricate aspects of learning (Gay, 2010).

Culturally Responsive Classroom Management – the analyzation of color-blind models of classroom management, and the instilling of culturally responsive practices which value and includes students' diverse backgrounds into teachers' management of the classroom (Weinstein et al., 2004).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy – a student-centered approach which acknowledges and values the racially and culturally diverse backgrounds that students bring with them to school by educators (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership – a conceptual framework which examines the practices of school leaders (i.e., principals and assistant principals) to determine if student-centered, social justice and equity-focused transformative ideologies are used with in school discipline decisions (Johnson, 2007).

Exclusionary Discipline – any form of discipline which removes a student from a learning environment (i.e., the classroom or from the school itself) for a short or extended period of time (CDF, 1975).

Expulsion – the complete removal of a student as a disciplinary consequence which eliminates their academic enrollment in their home school, and requires them to enroll at another school or an alternative education facility (Skiba et al., 2011).

In-School Suspensions – (ISS) a disciplinary sanction that results in the removal of a student from the classroom, into a separate room within the school for a temporary period of time (CDF, 1975).

Institutional Theory – utilized as a framework to understand the shared beliefs, practices, and values, and the acceptance of these items between group members within an institution (Scott, 1987).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – The 2002 federal legislation which authorized and supported the use of zero tolerance disciplinary policies, in an effort to support schools as they shifted towards more high-stake testing (Skiba et al., 2011).

Office Discipline Referral – the official document which records the misconduct of a student, that is sent to the school office for a school administrator to review (Smolkowski et al., 2016).

Out-of-School Suspensions – (OSS) a disciplinary sanction which involves the complete removal of a student from school grounds to either their home, or a sanctioned education facility (CDF, 1975).

Principal – responsible for the overall operation of their respective school, the coordination and implementation of school-wide policies and practices (i.e., school discipline) (Berlin, 2009).

Racism – the systemic act or actions at a macro or micro level which result in the oppression of racial minoritized groups (Bell, 1988).

School-to-Prison Pipeline – (STTP) the systematic overrepresentation of students in the U.S. juvenile and adult prison population, mirroring U.S. school discipline demographics, which is the culmination of policies and practices in education that over penalize/criminalizes students of color and disproportionately connects them to law enforcement agencies (Wald & Losen, 2007).

Socialization – a reiterative process, defined by school administrators' actions that are continuously reformed based on that school administrator's beliefs, prior experiences, and interactions with students, parents, and other school personnel while executing their duties (Armstrong, 2012).

Whiteness – the notion and social construction of an ideology which suppresses the identities and cultures of racial minoritized groups, while supporting and promoting the

rights and privileges through social norms, values, and laws of groups of people who identify as being Caucasian or of European descent (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Zero Tolerance Policies – state, district, and school-wide policies that provide punitive responses (i.e., suspensions, expulsions, or corporal punishment) for students' acts of misbehavior on school grounds (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

CHAPTER II: EQUITABLE ENFORCEMENT: MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF ADMINISTRATORS ENFORCEMENT OF SCHOOL RULES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS.

When examining the educational opportunities of African American students in U.S., it is imperative that critical inquiries are made regarding the inequitable enforcement of school discipline (Kennedy, Murphy, & Jordan, 2017; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2017). This inquiry mandates the examination of not only policies, but key stakeholders who are empowered by local, state, and federal policies on school discipline. Through state and federal legislature, school districts are provided a legal framework and policies for which school discipline consequences can be applied (e.g., in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, or corporal punishment), what situations or infractions warrant the application of each consequence, and how long a student can remain restricted from the classroom or school grounds based on the severity of their infraction. While the intention by policymakers was to strengthen educators' ability to reform or improve a student's behavior, a disconnect exists between the original intent of school discipline policies (theoretical) and the actual use of school discipline (practice) which is visible based on high number disciplinary outcomes for African American students when compared to their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

This ambiguity leaves school districts and their personnel with few, if any, exemplar examples of how to proceed with applying school discipline consequences with fidelity (Schachter, 2010; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009). As such, schools have now become self-contained discipline vacuums, where the school administrators are bestowed the power and authority to reprimand students with wide sweeping latitude (Heilbrun,

Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015). Still, the multiple interpretations and varied enforcement of discipline policies by school personnel has become the catalyst for discipline disparities for African American students across the U.S (Anderson & Ritter, 2016).

Much of the attention given to school discipline and school personnel has centered on the treatment of African American students by a teaching profession comprised mainly of White, middle class women (Landsman & Lewis, 2012; Snyder, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016); however, there is a growing body of literature on school administrators and school discipline (Kennedy et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba, Edl, & Rausch, 2007). School administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals) must approve any discipline sanction that results in the loss of instructional time for a student. Principals are tasked with managing every organizational aspect within their school (e.g., school discipline, teacher support, curriculum development, etc.), however, principals generally delegate one if not all of their assistant principals as the overseers of school discipline (Berlin, 2009).

As the immediate supervisor of personnel in the building, school administrators are required to maintain a professional relationship with the teacher who refers that student to their office (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The relationship itself exposes a symbiotic dynamic where the teacher is dependent on school administrators to certify their decision to uproot the student from the class, and school administrators are dependent on the teacher's ability to manage their classroom effectively, so as to reduce the number of students sent to the main office. The dependency between each party relies on consistency. However, school administrators are responsible for assessing the validity of a teacher's request to remove a student, and often times that assessment, depending on

whether the administrator approves or denies the request, can influence teachers' perceptions of how consistent school administrators are with enforcing discipline. These perceptions of consistency on the part of teachers may reveal an intriguing element as it pertains to school administrators and school discipline disparities for African American students. From the teachers' perspective, are school administrators enforcing student code-of-conduct rules with consistency; and does school administrators' consistency (based on the perceptions of teachers) with enforcing student code-of-conduct rules, influence school discipline outcomes for African American students?

To explore the aforementioned questions, this study sought to ascertain if teachers' responses about their school administrators could predict the risk of an African American student receiving an out-of-school suspensions. For this study, teachers' responses towards a specific prompt on the 2015-2016 North Carolina Teachers Working Conditions Survey were selected from middle schools located in five diverse school districts in North Carolina. Before reviewing the methodology, a comprehensive review of the literature concerning African American students, middle school, both exclusively and together; and school administrators' connection to school discipline is provided, followed by a succinct explanation of the guiding framework – Institutional Theory. After discussing the findings, specific recommendations for educational leadership programs and school administrators are outlined.

Literature Review

African Americans and Middle School Discipline

Middle school acts as a preparatory period for later academic success in high school and even college (The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk &

George W. Bush Institute, 2016). It is also during this academic time span where school discipline, the rules and expectations, become more stringent. On average, middle school students when compared to their peers in elementary and high school receive more referrals to the office for misbehavior (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017; Losen & Martinez, 2013). When a student receives one office discipline referral (ODR) during 6th grade, it increases the likelihood that they will continue to receive additional ODRs in 7th and 8th grade and in high school (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hilberth & Slate, 2014). As the frequency of office referrals increase for a particular student, so too does the chance that he or she will receive an exclusionary discipline intervention such as suspension or expulsion in the future (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). The student's academic trajectory can become disrupted after receiving one suspension. Studies have found that receiving one suspension in middle school has the capability of increasing a student's probability of getting involved in high-risk behaviors such as establishing substance and drug abuse problems, involving themselves with anti-social peers, and becoming disengaged with academics (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2014; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). These factors increase a student's potential to dropout from school either in middle school or later on in high school.

While the damaging effects of exclusive discipline practices are well documented, African American students are still the primary recipient of discipline interventions when compared their White and Latinx peers. Building upon previous studies (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 2000) that analyzed discipline disproportionalities, Skiba and colleagues (2011) partook in a study of middle schools in the southeastern portion of the U.S. Through their analysis, they were able to conclude

that rates of suspensions for African American students were disproportionally higher than their White peers. Although suspensions were the main factor of their analysis, they discovered that subjective enforcement of school discipline policies by school administrators contributed to the disparities that were occurring.

Supporting the findings from Skiba et al. (2011), Hilberth and Slate (2014) and Losen and Martinez (2013) also determined that African American students in middle schools garnered the majority of discipline infractions despite comprising a smaller percentage of the total school enrollment. Explanations behind such differences in discipline application for African American students are attributed to perceived racial threat/harm, teachers' or administrators' subjectivity based on implicit and explicit biases, and zero tolerance school discipline policies that awards teachers for pushing students out of class so to increase year-end testing scores (Martin, Sharp-Grier, & Smith, 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Welch & Payne, 2010). The dense amount of literature concerning discipline disproportionalities towards African American students reaffirms the importance of this issue. Still, a deeper analysis is needed concerning the preparation of school administrators, who act as important and highly influential decision-makers in school systems that continue to effortlessly reprimand and remove African American students at alarming rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The Role of School Administrators and School Discipline

School administrators' primary responsibilities outside of instructional leadership are to contend with the repercussions of student conflict, when the behavior negatively impacts the learning opportunities of other students (Fenning et al., 2008). Student management and the handling of discipline related incidents consume the largest portion

of school administrators' time (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002; Mason 2007; Williams, 2012). As the official respondent to student related issues outside of the classroom, school administrators are provided with a range of interventions to resolve conflicts such as in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, referrals to school counselors, and referrals to law enforcement agencies (Kennedy et al., 2017). It is noted that school administrators' personal philosophy, rather than the severity of the student's behavior, may play a larger role on the type of intervention selected (Bukoski, Lewis, Carpenter, Berry, & Sanders, 2015; Skiba et al., 2007).

Principals establish the school discipline culture for their school, and their philosophies often dictate how assistant principals interact with students when the perceived misbehavior occur. A principals' philosophy about the role of school discipline is a key element that decides if discipline is used as an exclusionary or preventative manner. Skiba et al. (2007) utilized survey data from high school principals in Indiana and found that principals' philosophy surrounding school discipline was centered around prevention or exclusion. Principals with an exclusionary philosophy had higher rates of school discipline outcomes as compared to principals who were oriented towards a more preventative philosophy. Skiba et al. (2014) and Kennedy et al. (2017) both found trends in their results which affirm the findings in Skiba et al. (2007); that principals are still primarily relying on their own beliefs, rather than school-wide rules to make decisions regarding discipline. Next in the chain of command are assistant principals, who take on the principals’ directive when it comes to student discipline and carry it out on a daily basis. As the arbiters of discipline, assistant principals (i.e., deans, vice-principals, etc.)

have remained relatively under-researched, yet seemingly serve as a vital cog in the school discipline mechanism (Banks, 2018).

Known findings about assistant principals suggest that far too often, individuals undertaking this position are poorly prepared by educational leadership programs, because the position is viewed more as an internship rather than critical role in the U.S. education system (Oleszewski, Soho, & Barnett, 2012; Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, & Wang, 2016). Without a guiding framework, individuals enter the position of assistant principal with the same beliefs and dispositions they held as a teacher, and struggle to acquire more effective dispositions regarding how to effectively and consistently enforce school discipline (Williams, 2012). This overlooked component could be a major factor as to why school discipline remains such an elusive concept to contend with for assistant principals. When school discipline is enforced at the administrative level the assistant principal's decisions are a direct reflection of the principal's philosophy on school discipline. The assistant principal's willingness to adhere to that philosophy (due to the lack of expertise in the area of school discipline) can often have them at odds with students, teachers, and sometimes the code-of-conduct policies (Kennedy et al., 2017). This intersection between philosophy and implementation is where inconsistency in discipline enforcement can occur, particularly for African American students who have been historically marginalized and stigmatized by inconsistent practices.

School Administrators and the Consistent Enforcement of Discipline

When school administrators are consistent with how they dispense discipline interventions regardless of the student's cultural, socioeconomic, or racial make-up, it prevents the over-exclusion of African American students for subjective reasons (Griner

& Stewart, 2013). This is a salient aspect. While the preliminary actions (both the teacher's and the student's) that occur before a student is reprimanded may be interpretable based on a school administrator's perception of those actions, when the school administrator selects an unwarranted punishment, African American students are often sent an explicit message that they are undeserving of a quality education through an unfair disciplinary process (Scott, Moses, Finnigan, Trujillo, & Jackson, 2017). Utilizing a grounded theory methodology, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) found through extensive research that the key to inclusive discipline practices is school administrators remaining consistent in how they dispersed discipline interventions. Teachers were asked to respond to a survey which probed how culturally responsive their high school administration was towards African American students when they were applying discipline. Teachers perceived that school administrators were consistent in their handling of discipline related incidents because administrators' decisions were transparent and in alignment with the school policies (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Similar to Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012), Louis, Murphy and Smylie (2016) conducted a study on principals and found that teachers perceived their principals to be consistent with enforcing discipline for students because the principals were transparent with how they made decisions.

The consistent enforcement of school discipline has immediate and lasting effects on students and teachers. Irby and Clough (2015) convened a focus group at two middle schools and three high schools, located in an urban city. The intent of the focus groups was to explore each schools' discipline culture and to understand how consistency was reflected within educators' decisions. What complicated the interpersonal relationships

between teachers and administrators was what Irby and Clough identified as vertical inconsistencies. Irby and Clough (2015) define vertical consistency as "the degree to which school professionals at different organizational levels share disciplinary philosophies that result in mutually supportive interventions and practices, such as teachers and principals" (p. 162). Their thematic findings revealed that misaligned vertical consistency negatively impacts a teacher's ability to appropriately apply discipline. These inconsistencies occurred when there was a disconnect between the teachers' strategies and perspectives, and those of their administrators who assisted them with discipline. Because of this, teachers' interpersonal relationships with their administrators began to erode, which made it difficult for teachers to discipline students in their respective classrooms as they believed their decision to remove a student from class would not be supported (Irby & Clough, 2015). For school administrators, it is imperative that they acknowledge that consistency when disciplining students, is important. Without inclusive, transparent, and consistent enforcement of discipline, school administrators could plausibly be impeding any school-wide effort to reduce the subjectiveness that often occurs towards African American students and their behaviors.

Theoretical Framework – Institutional Theory

As a subset of organizational theory, institutional theory (IT) states that organizations, in an effort to survive, typically adapt to the internal and external social demands in order to gain and sustain legitimacy (Scott, 1987; Scott & Mitchell, 1987). Initially conceptualized by W. Richard Scott (1987), this theory evaluates the process or processes that create structures, rules, policies, and routines as the guidelines for an organizations' social behavior. Residing in a social constructivist framework, IT also

asserts that organizations are defined by the actions of members inside of the organization, however, the actions of the members are directly related to interpersonal relationships, historical forces, and contemporary issues that exist. These three aspects become to define a practice or routine, and when that specific practice or routine is replicated by members of the organization, it is thus institutionalized into a rule or policy, thus making the practice an acceptable social norm (Scott, 1987).

However, as rules and practices are imitated, they are internalized by individuals, who then either change their behaviors to match said practice or rule, or resist the rule and practice (Scott, 1987). Individuals change their behaviors based on a reality built by the actions of their peers. It is also possible that when individuals of an organization reject this shared reality that they create an alternative reality that only accepts the actions and social norms by members who reflect their subclass. In the organizational structure of education, while teachers and school administrators serve within the same structure as members, they have the own separate subclasses or micro institutions.

This framework illuminates a number of explanations regarding school administrators' enforcement of school rules and teachers' perceptions of their consistency. The function of schools, as it pertains to school discipline, is to maintain order through a series of reprimands for perceived misbehavior. These reprimands are based on school rules, which were developed based on a long series of values, norms, and policies constructed by school personnel. Institutional theory would find that from these values and norms, the usage of OSSs is ascribed as an acceptable form of punishment, and thus when a teacher prescribes such an action it is warranted that a school administrator approve of this punishment. Although school administrators' disciplinary

enforcement should reflect the shared internal norms, they are also adapting to pressure from external factors (i.e., other teachers, school boards, parents, community members, district personnel, etc.) about reducing the discipline disparity in their school. The shared reality amongst teachers and school administrators is either affirmed when school administrators perform to the expectations or request given by the teacher, or fractured when the school administrator recommends a school discipline outcome that is not what the teacher requested. Drawing from the institutional theoretical framework, this study asks:

1. Do teachers' perceptions of their school administrators' consistent enforcement of school rules predict the rate of OSSs for African American students?
2. Do teachers perceive their school administrators to be effective at enforcing school discipline rules with consistency?

Methodology

Data and Sample

The sample for this study comes from public middle schools in North Carolina (*n* = 108), in the school districts of Alexander, Jackson, Stewart, Hughes, and McFarland (pseudonyms). These school districts were chosen, as they are considered the five most racially diverse school districts in North Carolina (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Database was analyzed to create a list of all public middle schools in these five counties that operated during the 2015-2016 academic year. This data was then merged, using a unique national identifier with data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core Data (n.d.),

which contains the geospatial location for each school (e.g., urban, suburban, or rural) and their socioeconomic status as indicated by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

School enrollment and school discipline data were collected from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Database (2018). This data set was then merged with the existing datasets. A descriptive analysis was compiled to obtain the number of singular OSS given out to African American students. Since this study is observing rates of suspensions for African American students only, the rate of suspensions was calculated utilizing the formula in Figure 1. This is known as the risk rate (Petrosino, Fronius, Goold, Losen, & Turner, 2017).

(Number of OSS for African American students ÷ Total number of African American students)

Figure 1. Risk Rate for African American Students

The risk rate (RR) of OSS for African American students was derived for each middle school, as it gives the probability of a student being suspended when compared to other students in that same ethnic group. The dependent variable in this study is the RR of African American OSS. The controlled variables in this study consist of school type (urban, suburban, and rural), the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch services and the total number of African American students enrolled.

The North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWCS) was the last dataset used in this study. The data was provided by the North Carolina Educational Research Data Center at Duke University. This survey is sent out to teachers and administrators electronically bi-annually, and contains a number of prompts which gauge

recipients' responses on items such as instructional leadership, school safety, student misconduct, administrative support, professional development, and instructional resources available. The results provided from this survey reflect teachers' perceptions or thoughts regarding the 2015-2016 academic year. The data was filtered so as to only collect responses from the corresponding middle schools, and then filtered again to only show responses from teachers. Each respondent is responsible for selecting items on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), and strongly agree (4). Each school's responses were averaged into a final score for the prompt 5.1.d on the NCTWCS which asks, *do school administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct?* A three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was done utilizing the statistical software package known as SPSS.

Data Analysis

In the first step, school geocode (e.g., urban, rural, and suburban) was entered, with urban schools being the reference group. For the second step the school level variables of African American students enrolled and percentage of students on free or reduced lunch, was entered. The third and final step inserted the mean rating of teachers' perceptions of their school administrators' consistent enforcement of school rules. Prior to running the analysis, multiple assumptions were tested. Utilizing a Q-Q plot residuals and a histogram, the analysis found no outliers, and it was determined that there was a linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Conducting a test of normality (i.e., Shapiro-Wilk), found the independent and dependent variables to be normally distributed. Additionally, the test for multicollinearity registered the highest variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1.410, which indicates that multicollinearity is absent.

Lastly, from screening the data there is no homoscedasticity nor is there autocorrelation between the variables. The hypothesis is *teachers' perception of school administrators' consistent enforcement of school rules in middle schools does predict risk rate of out-of-school suspensions for African American students.*

Findings

[Insert Table 1.1: APPENDIX A]

The sample was comprised of 62 urban schools, 26 suburban schools and 20 rural schools. Urban schools average the largest enrollment of African American students (M = 314.06), with rural schools with the second most (M = 283.60). The percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch across all school was .57, with urban schools (M = .65) and rural schools (M = .56) containing the largest percentage of students who received this service. The number of singular OSSs for African American students were the highest for urban schools (n = 1,856, M = 29.94, SD = 19.95), with rural schools registering the second highest total of out-of-school suspensions (n = 425, M = 21.25, SD = 13.62). The RR mean for African American student was 8.6%. Urban schools reported a 9.1% RR, which was higher than rural (7.6%) and suburban schools (8.1). In regards to teachers' rating on the prompt, *school administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct*, suburban schools had the highest rating (2.75) and rural schools had the lowest (2.60) with urban schools ranking in the middle (2.65).

[Insert Table 1.2: APPENDIX B]

A Pearson correlation was computed and the results denoted that the rate of singular OSSs for African American students has a weak negative relationship to teachers' perceptions of their administrators' consistent enforcement of rules (r = -.20, p <

.05) and a moderate positive relationship with the percent of student receiving free or reduced lunch ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). While there were statistically significant correlations between school types and school level predictors, their results were not a central part of the final analysis, and thus will not be discussed.

[Insert Table 1.3: APPENDIX C]

The first model incorporated urban, suburban, and rural variables, however, this model was not statistically significant associated with the dependent variable $F(2, 106) = .66$, $p > .05$). When the percentage of student receiving free or reduced lunch and African American student enrollment were inserted, the second model produced a statistically significant result $F(4, 104) = 8.30$, $p < .001$, with an adjusted $R^2 = .22$ ($R^2\Delta = .24$). In this model, only the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was found to be statistically significant from zero ($p < .001$). For the third model the variable participants' perception of consistent enforcement of school rules by their school administrators was inserted. This model produced a statistically significant result $F(5, 103) = 7.65$, $p < .001$, with an adjusted $R^2 = .34$ ($R^2\Delta = .03$). As individual variables, only the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch ($p < .001$) and teachers' perception of school administrators' consistent enforcement of school rules ($p < .05$) were determined to be statistically significant.

Running a G Power analysis, the sample size ($n=108$) in combination with an alpha level of .05 and an .80 power level produced a small (.12) effect size. For the third model, 28% of the variance can be attributed to the addition of the teachers' perceptions variable. For each unit of increase for teacher's perception regarding their school administrators' consistency, there is a .02 decrease in singular out-of-school suspension

rates for African American students. Furthermore, the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch weighed the largest on this model ($\beta = .55$).

Discussion and Implications

This study combined the variables of school type (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural), the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch services, the number of African American student enrolled and teachers' rating of how consistent their school administrators were at enforcing school rules to predict the RR of OSS for African American students. In answering the first research question, the findings reveal an inverse relationship between teachers' perceptions of consistency about their school administrators' enforcement of school rules and the RR of OSSs for African American students. Higher consistency ratings by teachers for their school administrators are associated with lower rates of OSSs for African American students in middle school. Thus, the null hypothesis, teachers' perception of school administrators' consistent enforcement of school rules at middle schools can predict the rate of out-of-school suspensions for African American students, is accepted. The second research question sought to determine if teachers believed that their school administrators were consistent with enforcing school rules. Teachers, across all school types in this sample do not agree that their school administrators are consistent with enforcing school rules. Although teachers from rural and urban schools indicated the least amount of satisfaction with their school administrators, teachers at suburban schools also found their school administrators' enforcement of school rules less than agreeable.

One finding that was not in the initial scope of this research was the statistically significant prediction of an increase in the RR of OSSs for African American students, as

the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch services increased. This finding corresponds with existing literature on the intersection of poverty, race, and school discipline (Monson, 2014). Additionally, this particular finding reaffirms the notion that when examining school discipline inequities for African American students, an interdisciplinary approach must be incorporated which explores the contextual factors impacting school (e.g., poverty, access to community resources, etc.).

Administrators' Consistency and Teachers' Perception

From an IT framework, the teachers' responses show that inconsistent enforcement of rules are partially to blame for the RR of African American students as it pertains to OSS, and that teachers (i.e., as their own institution) are resistant to the way school administrators are attempting to enforce school rules in general. While school administrators have attempted to normalize their process of enforcing school rules, under IT, the responses from this study suggest that there is a lack of transparency for how rules are enforced which is why teachers have formed their own set of norms. This harkens to the existing literature which suggests that inconsistent enforcement of school rules could result in the increased risk of African American students receiving an ODR or a suspension (Madlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Furthermore, the dissonance between school administrators' use of school discipline and teachers' perception of that use, could be an example of vertical inconsistency (Irby & Clough, 2015). This occurrence raises the possibility of cross-positional, intra-organizational inconsistency, one that can only be rectified by through transparency and constant communication from all parties involved (Griner & Stewart, 2013).

Implications

The findings do illuminate a number of implications for various stakeholders (e.g., teachers, assistant principals, principals and educational leadership programs). To strengthen the consistent application of school rules, school administrators should proactively engage with teachers regarding their decision on ODRs. Supporting consistency application of school discipline throughout the school can be undertaken by school administrators regularly meeting with teachers as a group to discuss school discipline trends in the data or best practices employed by teachers. Furthermore, school administrators must allocate time during the week to visit planning periods, to address any concerns or clear up any misconceptions that either teachers or the school administrator may have about specific incidents. These actions help to support all teachers, identify teachers who are struggling with the complexities of classroom management, and will strengthen teachers' perceptions that their school administrators actually care about the welfare of the student and the teacher (Louis et al., 2016). A recommendation for educational leadership programs is to offer anti-racist/bias coursework and field experiences in diverse settings that can prepare assistant principals and principal candidates to enter high-poverty schools, with a critical understanding of how the combination of race and socioeconomic status could sway their discipline practices. This effort alone cannot eliminate school discipline disparities in middle schools for all African American students, but it can inform school administrators that their actions regarding school discipline have far-reaching, sometimes unintended consequences on teachers' perceptions.

Lastly, while the results advocate for increased consistency in school discipline decisions, what is truly being required of school administrators is the equitable enforcement of school-wide policies and rules. The lack of consistency regarding school discipline decisions gives a strong indication that equity for African American students is absent, which could have latent consequences (i.e., increased drop-out rates, lack of academic engagement, etc.). However, a strong recommendation that can limit impartiality, is the examination of school discipline practices and policies by school administrators and parents – together. A social justice praxis which promotes equity is centered upon transparency, inclusion and accountability towards the needs of African American students. By having parents as co-partners, school administrators can work to construct policies that counter-balance inconsistent aspects of the current school discipline model.

Limitations

Regardless of the contribution this study provides to the existing literature, limitations do exist. For example, the amount of variance in the model accounts for less than 50% of the suspensions incurred by African American students. However, the small variance highlights the complex and numerous variables that contribute to school discipline outcomes for African American students (i.e., teacher experience, access to alternative discipline measures, student discipline background, gender, etc) – something was not accounted for in this study. Another limitation is the small effect size and a measure to increase the effect size would be to increase the number of schools and school districts analyzed. Moreover, this survey was administered throughout the state of North Carolina, without providing a clear definition of what *consistency* is at it relates to the

prompt. This could have led to different interpretations of the definition, thus skewing the results of the survey responses. While this study aggregated assistant principals and principals together because of how the survey prompt asked the question about school administrators, it is plausible that that teachers are referring to APs, principals or both groups. For clearer responses on who teachers are referring to, it is recommended that future surveys include a prompt that asks participants to rate their APs and principals as two separate groups.

Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of this study was to investigate if teachers' rating of their school administrators' ability to consistently enforce school rules could predict African American students' risk of receiving an OSS in middle school. The findings suggest that a higher consistency rating of school administrators from teachers, is directly connected to a lower risk of receiving an out-of-school suspension for African American students. Additionally, it was determined that regardless of school type (urban, suburban, or rural), that teachers on average disapprove with how their administrators enforce school rules. As scholars, practitioners and other education stakeholders seek new measures to reduce the frequent use of exclusionary discipline measures for African American students, a pragmatic yet simplistic approach may exist in simply requiring that school administrators adhere to being consistent, rather than relying on personal beliefs, when enforcing school rules.

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APPENDIX A.1

Table 1.1
Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Dependent Variables (n = 108)

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*
School Type			
Urban	62		
Suburban	26		
Rural	20		
School Data			
African American Students Enrolled	31,011	287.14	144.23
Urban	19,472	314.06	148.83
Suburban	5,867	225.65	129.97
Rural	5,672	283.60	127.48
FRL	50,286	465.61	237.56
Urban	31,265	504.27	247.04
Suburban	8,779	337.65	181.69
Rural	10,242	512.10	221.12
FRL Percentage		.57	.31
Urban		.65	.31
Suburban		.41	.27
Rural		.56	.27
African American OSS	2,740	25.37	18.34
Urban	1,856	29.94	19.95
Suburban	459	17.65	14.13
Rural	425	21.25	13.62
African American OSS Risk %		8.6	.041
Urban		9.1	.034
Suburban		8.1	.059
Rural		7.6	.028
Teachers' Perceptions Rating		2.67	.40
Urban		2.65	.38
Suburban		2.75	.42
Rural		2.60	.43

Note. FRL = free and reduce lunch; OSS = out-of-school suspensions. School and student level data was collected from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights Database and the Common Core Database for the 2015-2016 year. Teachers' Perception Rating on the North Carolina Teachers' Working Condition Survey was collected from North Carolina Education Data Center at Duke University.

APPENDIX B.1

Table 1.2
Intercorrelations for Predictive and Dependent Variables (n = 108)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
African American OSS	.14	-.45	-.12	.460**	.11	-.20*
Predictors						
Urban Schools		-.65**	-.55**	.28**	.22*	-.04
Suburban Schools			-.27**	-.30**	-.24*	.19
Rural Schools				-.02	-.01	-.08
School Level Predictors						
Percentage of Students on FRL					.49**	-.06
African American Students Enrolled						.02
Teachers' Mean Perception of Consistency						

Note. * p<.05; ** p<.01. FRL = free and reduced lunch; OSS = Out-of-school suspensions.

APPENDIX C.1

Table 1.3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Summary for Teachers' Perceptions of Administrators Rule Enforcement and African American OSS Risk with Controlled Variables

Variable	B	SEB	β	sr^2	R^2	$R^2\Delta$
Model 1					.01	
Suburban	-.01	.01	-.08	-.01		
Rural	-.01	.01	-.11	-.01		
Model 2					.25	.240***
Suburban	.01	.01	.08	.01		
Rural	-.01	.01	-.05	-.00		
FRL Percentage	.08	.01	.57	.23***		
African American Students Enrolled	-3.83	.00	-.14	-.02		
Model 3					.28	.03***
Suburban	.01	.01	.09	.01		
Rural	-.01	.01	-.06	-.00		
FRL Percentage	.07	.01	.55	.23***		
African American Students Enrolled	-3.44	.00	-.12	-.01		
Teachers' Mean Perception of Consistency	-.02	.01	-.18	-.04*		

Note. * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$. FRL = free and reduced lunch; OSS = Out-of-school suspensions.

CHAPTER III: EXPLORING ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' ENFORCEMENT OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

A considerable amount of research, resources, and time is expended on detailing the inequitable enforcement of school discipline toward African American students (Fabelo et al., 2011; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Martin Sharp-Grier & Smith, 2016). There is explicit evidence that suggests that middle school students accrue more discipline infractions (e.g., office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions) than their elementary and high school peers (Losen & Martinez, 2013). High rates of discipline are unfortunate at any grade level, but they are especially critical in middle school, where school personnel's decision to reprimand an African American student for normal adolescent behavior could seriously damage that student's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Perry & Morris, 2014). When deconstructing the issue of school discipline in urban middle schools for African American students, there is the temptation to treat this item as a monolithic issue rather a symptom that is comprised of several interconnected parts.

Collectively, there are a number of factors that can create such tension in the classroom, that do not originate from African American students. These factors include but are not limited to intercultural conflict, a lack of classroom management proficiency by teachers, teachers' implicit and explicit cultural/racial bias, and racial threat (Aloe, Amo, & Shanahan, 2014; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, Noguera, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). These factors go regularly unaddressed; however, what is easily visible are the high number of subjective office referrals that African American students receive for infractions of disobedience, defiance,

and disruption (Morris & Perry, 2017). Scholars have attempted to address the dispensing of these types of referrals by suggesting that teachers become more responsive to the academic, social, and emotional needs of African American students (Gay, 2002, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995), yet few scholars have examined the responses to the office referrals by school administrators who have the power, authority, and interpersonal relationships to dismiss such referrals (Anyon et al., 2018).

While the entire school administration is legally required to assist in supporting the redirection of a student's behavior when that student is required to leave the classroom, scholars have indicated that this specific responsibility is typically bestowed on assistant principals (i.e., deans of students, deputy principals, or vice-principals) by their respective principal (Berlin, 2009; Glanz, 2004; Kwan, 2009b; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Assistant principals (APs) are often overlooked, but they play a vital role when it comes to school discipline. A large portion of their day is consumed with responding to student-teacher conflict and student-student conflict that results in school discipline (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Kennedy, Murphy, & Jordan, 2017; Kwan, 2009a). Conversely, there are few examinations of this position that expose which factors APs rely on to make their final decision about a student's discipline outcome. Examining the factors that influence APs discipline decisions is important, as these factors offer up possible guideposts for how to appropriately construct measures to eliminate the symptoms of school discipline inequities for African American students.

Rather than scrutinizing any deficiencies of AP, time and effort is better suited towards revealing the affirmative approaches APs use to minimize the overutilization of exclusionary discipline interventions for African American students. Thus, the purpose of

this study is to explore the experiences of five APs at two urban middle schools. This approach seeks to garner a greater understanding of their decision-making process, and the professional dispositions that made these APs effective at interacting with African American students, during a disciplinary episode. This article begins with a review of the literature regarding the training and socialization of APs, and the factors that impact their development as administrators of school discipline. There is a gap in the literature concerning which factors influence how APs investigate school discipline incidents, and how they incorporate multiple sources of information (e.g., discipline policy, office referral, student voice, personal philosophy, etc.) to make their final discipline recommendation. A brief synopsis of Critical Race Theory is presented, followed by the design of the study. The methodology utilized for this study follows a phenomenological approach that uses semi-structured interviews to highlight commonalities among APs' personal experiences. The final section offers recommendations towards supporting APs and future research possibilities.

Review of Literature

The Assistant Principal Position

The role and responsibilities of APs require that they wield a unique set of skills and dispositions distinct from that of the principal. While there was previously little delineation in the types of activities APs and principals conducted, the role of AP has evolved in the past twenty years due to unforeseen complexities (Barnett, Soho, & Olezewski, 2012; Glanz, 1994). As principals control the structural operations of a school building (i.e., maintaining finances, the retention and recruitment of school personnel, the enactment of district-wide policies, and the development of teachers through instructional

leadership, etc.), they delegate much of the responsibility for the daily operation of the building to their APs (Busch, MacNeil, & Baraniuk, 2010). APs' roles and responsibilities differ based on the school and district they serve in, which attributes to many APs indicating that they are unprepared to handle the challenges of the position (Marshall & Phelps Davidson, 2016). Although this uneasiness when addressing the complexity of the position could be simply felt only by novice APs, Barnett, Soho, and Oleszewski (2012) found that veteran APs (i.e., defined as have three or more years in the position) typically exhibit similar perceptions, reactions, and personal and professional qualities as novice APs. This suggests that despite the number of years in the position, APs are still trying to mature in response to the evolving needs of students and teachers alike. An AP's adjustment to the various challenges within their position is dependent on their experiences in their educational leadership program, and how their socialization process transpires once they assume the mantle of AP at their school (Armstrong, 2012).

Educational Leadership and Assistant Principals

Individuals seeking to become an AP are required to undergo training with a certified educational leadership program at an accredited institution of higher education. Depending on state statutes, typically individuals are required to have obtained a teacher's licensure and provide instruction to students for a minimum of three years before enrolling in an educational leadership program (National Policy Board of Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). The purpose of the educational leadership program is to capture a teacher's dispositions, beliefs, pedagogical practices and instructional knowledge, and orient it in such a manner that upon exiting the program, individuals are ascribing to the nine standards set forth by a consortium of organizations

known as National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015). The NPBEA formally known as the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), redefined educational leadership standards to support the growing needs of students and school personnel, which was made evident by the National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The NPBEA (2015) advanced the following interdependent domains, qualities, and practices to ensure student success: mission, vision, and core values; ethics and professional norms; equity and cultural responsiveness; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; community of care and support for students; professional capacity of school personnel; professional community for teachers and staff; meaningful engagement of families and community; operations and management; and school improvement. The collective aim of these standards is to:

> Direct influence on members of the profession by creating expectations and setting directions for the practice of educational leaders. They have indirect influence on educational leadership by helping to shape the actions and support provided to members of the profession by professional associations and the system of supporting institutions involved in educational leader preparation and development. They also have indirect influence on educational leadership by serving as a foundation for policy and regulations regarding the profession and its practice, including those related to educational leader preparation, certification, professional development, and evaluation (p. 5).

These standards address two objectives: to reframe current educational leaders and their practices; and to give educational leadership programs the necessary guidelines which will allow them to better prepare the next generation of educational leaders (NPBEA, 2015). While these standards seem to encompass a number of overarching concepts, dispositions, and values that APs can implement the moment they enter their school, the

translation of these standards into the daily practices of APs can be challenging, particularly for those in urban schools.

APs have routinely noted their own ineptness as they transitioned into this position, causing institutions of higher education to examine the effectiveness of their educational leadership programs (Backor & Gordon, 2015; Busch et al., 2015). Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, and McNeese (2016) conducted focus groups with APs and centered the discussion around the APs perception of preparedness as they exited their educational leadership program. While APs indicated that they felt prepared to conduct instructional leadership type activities based on the courses they enrolled in and the high level of instruction provided by their professors; they found themselves becoming more acclimated to their responsibilities after serving in their position for an extended period of time (Peters et al., 2016).

APs are relying on their professional experiences rather than their formalized instruction, and this symbolizes a systemic disconnect between the realities that APs experiences and national educational leadership standards that are meant to prepare them for these realities (Johnson, 2016). NPBEA standards situate the role of AP as a separate position from the principal; however, educational leadership programs narrowly focus their coursework to specifically address the needs of the principal position (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). The lack of attention given to the AP position by educational leadership programs suggests that this position is more of an internship or a job-shadowing position, rather than a position that is a critical component of the organizational structure within schools (Mertz, 2000). Educational leadership programs prepare candidates to assume the role of principalship, without considering that some candidates may only aspire to

become an AP (Armstrong, 2009, 2012). By failing to include relevant coursework for APs which addresses their current responsibilities, educational leadership programs are making a compelling case for APs to search elsewhere to develop the required dispositions, values, and beliefs concerning the position. This search regularly begins as soon as they accept the first administrator position.

Learning through Socialization

Immediately upon assuming the responsibilities and duties of an AP, individuals are undergoing a maturation undertaking known as socialization. Socialization is the process where individuals acclimate themselves through interactions. Armstrong (2010, 2012) states that there are two types of socialization which are professional and organizational. While organizational socialization is the transmittal of a school's culture to the AP, the second portion of this conceptual framework distinguishes professional socialization as the internalization of skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to for the AP position (Armstrong, 2010). The internalization of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions is often what APs struggle with the most. Professional socialization consists of APs going through the phases of entry-exit, immersion-emersion, disintegration-integration, and transformation-restabilization. Each phase builds upon the previous. The entry-exit and immersion-emersion phases primarily covers an individual's pursuit of the AP position (e.g., through enrolling in an educational leadership program, accepting additional leadership roles at their school, and securing an administrator position), whereas the disintegration-integration and transformation-restabilization phases causes the AP to reexamine their positionality and their dispositions that define their daily operations (Armstrong, 2010).

While Armstrong links this metamorphosis to novice APs, it is quite conceivable that more tenured APs are still undergoing the socialization transition. Despite APs becoming comfortable in their role, it is quite natural for APs to shift back and forth between socialization phases. As APs contend with new, reality-altering experiences, they can often go from being very dependable in the decisions they make, to being highly inconsistent (Oleszewski et al., 2012). This is highly concerning because as to date, there are no known studies which investigate the type of experiences that cause APs to revert back to their initial socialization phases. Furthermore, as APs descend into their period of "trial and error" there is the increased potential for inconsistency to occur in how they conduct their daily responsibilities (i.e., managing student discipline).

Concerning student discipline, APs socialization process for this particular duty is dictated by their interpersonal relationships with principals, students, teachers, and other staff (Armstrong, 2009). When students are referred to the office for misconduct, APs must use their own discretion to determine the length and severity of the discipline intervention. APs construct their process for investigating and enforcing discipline matters based on the experiences that occur during their socialization process. Armstrong (2009) interviewed eight APs who worked in a large school district and inquired about the factors that influenced their management of student conflict. The APs stated that often their interpersonal relationships with teachers and the disciplinary style of their supervising principal, caused them to reject their own dispositions and assimilate based on organization affiliation. During instances of conflict where students were correct and the teacher was determined to be wrong, APs found themselves defending the teacher and zero tolerance disciplinary policies, so as to decrease teacher-to-administrator tension

(Armstrong, 2009). The need to validate teachers' decisions rather than the needs of the student ties back to the inconsistent decision-making phase that APs go through during socialization. Unfortunately, APs' unwillingness to affirm a consistent and equitable disciplinary process, has led to the unpredictable enforcement for discipline policies; this aspect has taken away valuable learning opportunities for African American students more than any other racial group.

Skiba et al. (2011) determined that the dispositions and subjectivity of administrators, plays a role in African Americans receiving harsher penalties than their White peers. After analyzing office discipline referrals and disaggregating these infractions by race, these researchers found that elementary and middle school African American students were sent to the office more frequently than White and Latino students. The researchers also determined that regardless of the type discipline infraction that occurred in the classroom, differential treatment for African American students still transpired at the administrative level. The differential treatment that occurs at the administrative level stems from the implicit and explicit biases that school administrators hold against African American students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Smith & Hain, 2012).

To combat the tendency to rely on biases when disciplining students, APs should lean more towards having African American students become integral partners of their own behavior redirection, when appropriate. When African American students are valued as critical co-decision makers in the classroom (academically, socially, and emotionally) and engaged as such, African American students are able to understand and redirect, with support, their own misbehaviors, and assist in developing and sustaining school climates

that promote their sense of belonging (Jagers, Lozada, Rivas-Drake, & Guillaume, 2017; Kyere, Joseph, & Wei, 2018). This type of engagement/partnership benefits APs, because rather than forcing African American students to realign their behaviors based on the power and authority of the AP position (which can be biased based on the experiences of that person), the pre-established relationships with African American students opens up the possibility for self-governance, thus allowing APs to relegate less time and resources to disciplining certain behaviors. Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) conducted a case study on an assistant principal located in an urban, racially and linguistically diverse school. Madhlangobe and Gordon determined that the students and teachers felt that this individual carried an affirmative based ideology when interacting with African American students. The participant exhibited aspects of being a culturally responsive leader, by holding all parties involved responsible after a discipline incident occurred. In particular, the participants agreed that the AP formed collaborative discipline contracts with students and the teachers, which gave the AP the capability to focus reforming behaviors (with teachers and students) based on strong interpersonal relationships rather than having to rely on exclusionary discipline practices (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

The examination of APs and their connection to school discipline is necessary, as it could reveal which factors that APs rely on frequently (e.g., their own dispositions, interpersonal relationships, school-wide policies on discipline, principal philosophies on school discipline, etc.), to minimize student-to-student and student-to-teacher conflict and recommend the appropriate discipline intervention for African American students. To address the previously mentioned aspects and understand how their connection to race

offers additional complexities in daily decision-making process of APs, this study will employ a critical race theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework, acknowledges the role that race and racism plays in marginalizing individuals and groups in society. This theoretical framework prescribes approaches to confront the societal structures and systems that promote exclusion based on race. CRT critiques the notion of a post-racial society by asserting that the social construction concept of race, and the effects of its force (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation) has never disappeared (Bell, 1992, 1995). CRT views race, racism, and power as aspects which undergird the very fabric of modern society. CRT scholars state that those three items intersect between all social classifications such as gender, class, sexual identity, national origin, and language. The untangling of these social classification from up under the grip of racism, will end subordination not just for African Americans, but for all historically marginalized groups (Matsuda, 1991). CRT is comprised of five tenets, however for the purposes of this proposed study, three tenets are used which are experiential knowledge, the challenging of color-blindness and race neutrality, and the interdisciplinary approach to eliminating the impact that race has on societal structures or processes (Bell, 1995, 2004; Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Experiential Knowledge

According to CRT, the penalties that race exerts on individuals of color stems from the ahistorical approach to defining which groups' knowledge and experiences are of value. Groups of color's knowledge and history is disregarded and devalued in order to

promote a centralized history based in a western Eurocentric epistemology. Such a stance promotes subjugation and serves to eliminate opposing or complimentary ideologies that come from communities of color. The experiential knowledge tenet of CRT recognizes the importance of counter-narratives and how these stories deconstructs myths, stereotypes, and biases that are placed on groups of color (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). By focusing on the counternarratives, groups of color (i.e., African American students) are validated and this pushes against the overtly White anecdotes that are pervasive education.

Khalifa, Jennings, Briscoe, Oleszweski, and Abdi (2014) challenges school administrators who serve in urban environments to critically examine whose voice is important when they are making decisions for or about African American students. The stories and counternarratives that resonate from students of color have the potential to positively impact the professional development of school administrators (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009).While the dialogue about African American students in education is often dominated by data-reliant school administrators, any effective reformation of school practices or policies such as discipline must purposefully include authentic voices from African American students, their families, and other school personnel who can serve as experiential advocates (Khalifa et al., 2014).

Challenging Color-Blindness and Race Neutrality

When addressing issues of inequality and inequity, it is impossible to make these types of decisions without recognizing that race exhibits an extensive amount of influence in U.S. society. There is a large misnomer that systems and societal structures are neutral agents, whose origins and contemporary existence are void of racism.

Challenging the false existence of race neutrality means first recognizing that systems, individuals, and their decisions are either promoting racism or negating it (Bell, 1995). The failure to account for the intense pressure race exerts on education (e.g., the devaluation of African Americans and the subjective enforcement of discipline against African American students, etc.) only encourages all individuals to promote the illusion of a post-racial education system. For example, requiring that aspiring APs only need to meet the NPBEA disposition of, "caring for the needs of students, parents, and the community" by undertaking a limited amount of coursework which covers diversity or multiculturalism, vastly overlooks the critical and complex involvement that race has on the structure of urban schools and the educational opportunities provided to African American students (Lewis, 2003). This results in some administrators perceiving themselves as "race-conscious", when in reality these administrators could be promoting deficit ideologies against African American students as it pertains to academics and school discipline (Anyon et al., 2018; Reyes, 2006).

Interdisciplinary Approach to Eliminating Racism

To establish affirmative solutions to impede the detrimental influence racism exerts against people of color, CRT scholars assert that multiple groups and individuals from various disciplines must work in concert to eliminate racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). An interdisciplinary approach recognizes that research about race should involve multiple entities, as the effects of race have made an impression on numerous racial, sexual, gender, and ethnic groups (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Within education, the interdisciplinary scholarship situates educators, as individuals with power and authority, with the responsibility of not relying solely on past approaches or methods. APs as

educators can only provide the appropriate discipline intervention for African American students when they are gleaning experiential knowledge from multiple perspectives such as the students, their families, the teacher, other administrators, and themselves.

The integration of these three tenets provides an overarching lens for which to examine the under-studied position of AP and their connection to African American school discipline. Exploring the prior and lived experiences is essential to revealing relevant factors that define their dispositions. A second aim of this exploration is to deconstruction their decision-making process and ascertain if they are able to recognize the significance of race in the actions or inactions for themselves and those around them. The aforementioned tenets of CRT acted as guideposts for the following research questions; (1) what are assistant principals' perceptions regarding the use of specific school discipline interventions; and (2) how do assistant principals use multiple data collection points (e.g., interpersonal relationships, school-wide data, etc.) to decrease the overreliance of suspensions and expulsions with African American students?

Methodology

Steeped in a phenomenological approach, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of APs employed in urban middle schools, with a majority African American student population. APs take on multiple responsibilities and there is a demand placed on them to consider multiple factors (e.g., their own dispositions, school policy, racial demographics, principal's discipline philosophy, and teachers' discipline philosophy) while proceeding through the disciplinary process. The experiences that the participants encountered as teachers and as APs offer a unique perspective about APs' responsibilities, their development as educators, and the factors which have crystalized

their disciplinary philosophy and practices in the position. While the topic of school discipline and African American students seems to dominate public school discussions, the mental, emotional, and physical act of disciplining for an AP is unique. Unique in the sense that APs for a certain portion of time, are situated in a finite space that requires them to draw in various pieces of information to make a decision that could potentially have an infinite effect on that particular African American student and their family. A phenomenological approach appeared to be the most appropriate design to unpacking the space that APs exist in when dealing with school discipline.

Participants

Each individual for this study was selected, due to their firm understanding of school discipline, data on school discipline, and their admitted commitment to advocating for best practices when utilizing school discipline outcomes. This was established through prior conversations with the participant, prior to the subsequent interview. Five individuals were interviewed for the study and the names of the individuals and their respective schools have been replaced by pseudonyms. All of the participants were employed at middle schools with the classification of International Baccalaureate (IB) school. IB is a school whose course offerings and curriculum are centered around, "high-quality and challenging educational programmes for a worldwide community of schools aiming to create better, more peaceful world" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013, p. 1). Schools that embody this model focus on the core values of centering learning around students, developing effective approaches to teaching and learning and provides a global context to learning (International Baccalaureate, 2013). Three of the participants are employed at a high-performing, low suspending urban school (Dutch

Hollow Middle), and the remaining two participants are employed at a low-performing, high suspending school (Taylor Thomas Middle). Dutch Hollow middle school is located in a metropolitan area, while Taylor Thomas middle school is in a rural geographical location. In the last two years, Taylor Thomas middle school has transitioned from a traditional public school and into an IB. This transition caused instability in the type of curriculum employed and the quality of teachers in the school. Additionally, Taylor Thomas has eight low-performing elementary schools feeding into it. In comparison, Dutch Hollow middle school has been a stable (e.g., in regards to staff attrition and the type of curriculum utilized) IB school for over six years and is designated as a magnet school, with a selective entry process. These characteristics impact the dynamics of the schools and the participants' ability to conduct school discipline.

Two participants are African American, with one being male and the other being female. Three of the participants are White (one female and two males). Each participant was related to at least one person who is or was a certified teacher. All of the participants obtained their teaching license and their masters' degree in educational leadership from traditional education preparation programs. Meredith, Jack, and Kasen serve at Dutch Hollow Middle. Meredith is a White female in her late 20s, who worked in education for eight years, with three of those years being in her current position as an AP and the remainder being an English teacher for high school students. Jack is an African American male in his early 50s who has served in multiple education roles in the last 25 years. He worked as a custodian, teaching assistant, and special education teacher. Jack spent the last eight years as an AP. This is his second school to which he has served as an AP, with the previous position being at a Title I urban middle school. Kasen, is a White male in his

late 30's. He was a physical education teacher and girls' basketball coach for six years at an urban and rural middle school and has worked at Dutch Hollow Middle School for the past four years as an AP. He has 10 years of experience in education.

Brandon is a White male in his late 30's, with seven years of experience as a teacher and five years' experience as an AP. He previously taught science at urban and rural middle and high schools prior to his current position at Taylor Thomas Middle School. Shannon is an African American female who is entering her second year as an assistant principal at Taylor Thomas Middle School. She was a science teacher for nine years. She has taught at schools with a racially and culturally diverse student demographic and at a school with a student demographic that was predominately White.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the summer of 2018, one week before the start of the school year. By conducting the interviews prior to the start of the school year, participants were able to better reflect on their past experiences without being distracted by their regular school responsibilities. Participants were recruited for the study through convenience and snowball sampling through the principals of these particular schools. These schools were selected as their data for the last few years indicate a decrease in school suspensions for African American students. After the principals recommended their APs for the study, each participant was sent an email about the study, inquiring if they would volunteer. Upon agreeing to participate, the participants and the researcher agreed upon a time to meet for the interview. The interviews were conducted in each AP's office to allow for personal comfort and privacy. The interviews

lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed, and each member was allowed to view the transcript to verify its authenticity (e.g., member check).

Data Analysis

Coding was completed in three rounds. During the first round of open coding, phrases and terms which seemed important to the research questions were selected. During the second round of coding (axial) the codes and phrases were grouped together based on critical race theory. During the final round (selective), the established codes were merged together based on commonalities that emerged from the data that related to the study's overall purpose. Through the analysis three themes emerged which best captured what was occurring the data. These emergent themes are participants' adaptive dispositions, interdisciplinary perspectives and the importance of experiences, and cultivating relationships. It is these three themes which best defined how each participant created, developed, and sustained their current disciplinary philosophies and practices when working in urban schools with African American students.

To create an authentic and transparent collection of participants' recollections of their experiences, it was vitally important to reveal to them the positionality of the researcher. As an African American male whose professional experiences involved assisting youth who were suspended or expelled from school, or detained as the result of alleged criminal activity, with obtaining an education certification (e.g., GED or high school diploma); it was important not to allow my own ideologies of how African American youth are disenfranchised because of administrators' decisions to influence the types of questions that were asked. Furthermore, there was a deliberate effort to disclose to the participants that the purpose of the research was not to condemn their actions or

their evolution as an administrator. This helped participants to develop a connection with the interview process and intentionally describe rich experiences with a range of emotions, which would have been absent if transparency was not present.

Findings

From the five transcripts, there were 130 identified codes. After combining codes based on similarities and context, the 130 codes were condensed into 25 codes. Out of the 25 codes, three themes emerged. These themes are adaptive dispositions, incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives, and cultivating relationships. Table 2.1 provides the themes, the collective definition of that theme and the codes that were encompassed by each theme.

Adaptive dispositions pertain to the values and ideas that participants either entered the teaching profession with or developed during their classroom tenure. While these dispositions benefited each participant as a teacher, some of their dispositional ideas and values were reformed or eliminated as they became more acclimated with their role as an assistant principal in an urban school. Incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives is the process or practices that APs utilizes to obtain information about African American students academic, social, and family contexts, from a myriad of sources inside and outside of the school. Lastly, cultivating relationships as a theme centers upon the creation and development of interpersonal practices with school staff, African American students, and their families which act as critical components in the effort to minimize the use of discipline as a behavior modifier.

Adaptive Dispositions

The participants in the study all entered the teaching profession with predefined values and ideas about curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and student performance. Primarily, the driving factor behind their dispositions regarding classroom structure stemmed more from their family background and education experiences in K-12 environments, more than their preparation and training in a teacher preparation program. This was particularly true for Kasen, who stated:

> My parents were educators and they strongly suggested that I did not become a teacher because of the low salary. I watched my fathers' style of teaching and how he managed students and it was extremely structured. There was a strong expectation that the teacher instructs and the student is expected to learn, and this is to be done without the need for "relationships". I appreciated his ability to teach children, but I knew I could not be that type of teacher. I value structure in the classroom and I think relationships are key to helping students perform. This influenced how I instructed students more than anything else.

Kasen's response matches the type of responses that each of the participants gave about what propelled them into the teaching profession. In connection with that response Jack indicated, "I had two generations of teachers in my family, who shaped my values and beliefs about students long before taking a singular teacher prep course." The participants all gave responses that seemed to suggest that for their students, there was an expectation of excellence and this often clashed with their classroom management techniques. For Brandon, he viewed instruction and students behaving in class as tied together. He stated:

> For me, it was simple. I have a responsibility to teach and you have a responsibility to learn. Sure, no novice teacher enters the profession with great classroom management capabilities…..but still, students should be in their seats and willing to learn despite their backgrounds. Working in an urban and rural settings I viewed each child…no matter their race or class the same.

Although the participants' dispositions regarding student performance and classroom were key factors in their ability to obtain an assistant principal position, they eventually realized that in order to best serve the needs of students, it was best to acquire position appropriate dispositions - something that was not provided to them within their educational leadership program.

A commonality amongst all the participants was their willingness to stress mixed feelings about their educational leadership preparation. All of the participants except for Kasen, graduated from a traditional program in North Carolina, while Kasen matriculated from a traditional program in Pennsylvania. Each admitted to entering their educational leadership program because as teachers, they strove to make a larger impact outside of the classroom, particularly on the lives of students. While their educational leadership programs offered courses about the legalities of operating a school, school finance, and instructional leadership, missing from the program were courses that directly dealt with managing student behaviors as an administrator, and the complexities (i.e., socioeconomics, funding resource, desegregation, resegregation, etc.) which impact student learning particularly in urban school environments. Shannon, who is entering her second full year of being an assistant principal vividly explained that she needed to adapt quickly to how she conducted herself as an AP:

> I enjoyed my educational leadership program, but it did little to prepare me for the daily responsibilities of being assistant principal and the impact poverty, trauma and race have on student learning. I was not offered courses that directly discussed multiculturalism, race or how to create and manage relationships with students. When we did discuss school discipline, it was in relation to the overall learning differences that students may have.

Meredith echoed these sentiments, stating "how I viewed the world, the role of educators, and how I responded to my responsibilities changed the longer I remained in my

position" in that, "I could not continue to perform my duties with the mindset of a teacher".

Structure, high expectations of students, and orderly conduct based on their own education experience were signature dispositions for the participants as teachers. However, once the participants became APs, their dispositions began to evolve in response to needs of the students. "As a teacher, if you were sleeping in my class, I felt that it was disrespectful and I would kick you out," Brandon added. He paused and then stated, "but as an assistant principal, a kid sleeping in class is the least of my concerns as removing them prevents them from getting any instruction." As they spend more time in the position, each participant indicated that their beliefs around discipline changed to become more student-centered. The participants readily admitted that as teachers, there were a number of students they should not have removed from class, and that many of their practices were teacher-centered, even though they believed they were acting in the best interest of the student. The participants' adapted their dispositions to reflect their overarching responsibilities of managing multiple classrooms and multiple school personnel, not just the individual students in the classrooms.

Incorporating Interdisciplinary Perspectives

One signature aspect of these participants daily routines when conducting discipline either as punitive or preventative measure, is developing mechanisms to incorporate multiple perspectives. As a teacher, they were the sole authoritative figure in the classroom and that allowed them to make decisions on discipline related matters based on their relationship with the student. As an AP, the participants indicated that it was impossible to know every student in the grade they level they were responsible for.

Each student brings with them a narrative that extends beyond the classroom. This narrative is composed of multiple pieces of information and it is often locked away with different people in the school that the student trusts. As a long-time educator, Jack recalled an instance where he altered his disciplinary practice because of additional information provided to him by the school counselor:

> We had this African American female student….who'd been through a lot of trauma. Her mother threatened to kick her out the house when she was young, and eventually the mother ended up abandoning the young lady. At the time this was information that was not known to me or the staff. Almost everyday she would get into arguments with teachers and storm out the room. Then one day, when I bumped into her mentor, the mentor informed me of the history and the amount of trauma the student lived with. The next day at school, I sat down with the student and the social worker and we created preventative plans that would help reduce her anxiety at school.

Jack's account aligns with the other participants' responses about the importance of viewing students and their behaviors as a symptom, rather than a character flaw; and in viewing it as a symptom it is critical to get various pieces of information from stakeholders who do not serve as authoritative figures. While the participants serve at two different schools, each principal paired a school counselor with the AP for that grade level. The participants found this to be an important component which moderated how they dispensed consequences. Brandon indicated:

> I know I have the power, the authority, and the legal backing to shape a child's life with one suspension recommendation. The more I dealt with students in this position, the less I wanted to place something on their record which could impact their high school career and determine if they got into a college later on. I rely on the school counselors, other assistant principals, parents, mentors and even my principal as means to gather information about the student. Their insight makes me more effective at my job when it comes to the type of discipline I dispense to a student.

Brandon and the other participants suggested that early on in their assistant principal tenure, they relied heavily on guidance from their principal. The longer the participant remained in the position, the more they gathered information on a student from the teacher, other assistant principals, school counselors, social workers, and mentors.

What was noticeable about some of the participants was their effort to address issues of race when reviewing office referrals from teachers. Meredith, who is a White woman purposefully called out the disparities in how some teachers who are White, discipline African American students. She states,

> I have a teacher in the 7th grade…let's just say I am pretty sure she is biased against African American students. I've had African American students sent to my office for infractions they did not commit. I understand that they are middle school students, but I listen to their case because I never want them to think I do not care. I have had several conversations with the teacher because at times, she is referring students without even taking the time to prevent the issue, or she just removes African American kids who she feels are "challenging her" when in reality, they are only trying to get clarification about what she is talking about.

All the participants except Brandon indicated that race does play a role when it comes to discipline, which drives them to get context behind each office referral sent their way. Shannon states, "When I see that I am getting several referrals a day from the same teacher… I tend to disregard the referrals that are subjective in nature…you know, disrespect, disengaged, etc." The participants who did discuss race did indicate that many of the discrepancies with office referrals come from their White teachers. Although there are racial and cultural differences between students and teachers, the participants felt that much of the referrals were due to teachers' lack of classroom management skills, which is the result of poor instruction. Kasen, who indicated he had strong classroom management techniques stressed that "disengagement and disruptions may be symptoms of so-called behavior, and a cause for an office referral, but the real issue is that the

teacher is not making the content relevant for the student." Instead of reprimanding the student, based on behavior which may not correspond with Euro-normative expectations, the participants stressed that when disparities in the number or type of office referrals is known, they would seek out the teacher in question and provide instructional leadership support.

Another perspective which helps to clarify and assist reducing discipline referrals is school and student discipline data. Each of the participants noted that a large portion of their job beyond the daily interaction with students and teachers is reviewing discipline data. Data review is done either as a preventative measure or a reactive measure. Meredith states, "often I review students files to get a better understanding of what they have gone through", which she adds "I can use previous information to set a student up to succeed, rather than fail throughout the school year". The participants purposefully review their school discipline data to see if policies, such as dress code violations, were targeting certain groups of students. Kasen indicated that often he reviews data to prevent multiple students with severe discipline concerns from having the same class with a teacher that is less skilled at classroom management. Having multiple perspectives about students and teachers adds an additional layer of certainty for the participants, which, as Brandon suggests, "makes it easier to implement the correct solution concerning discipline".

Cultivating Relationships

Each of the participants stressed that discipline was a result they wanted to avoid. Throughout the interview, participants such as Kasen stressed the need for relationships as a manner to prevent or limit the use of discipline interventions such as suspensions.

The purpose of cultivating relationships as an assistant principal serves a measure to support students' academic growth. The findings suggest that the participants managed two relationship structures in their role. The first relationship is with students and their families and the second relationship structure is with school staff (i.e., principal, school counselor, teachers, etc.).

Managing these relationships effectively meant that participants needed to develop a new set of interpersonal communication techniques; and often these techniques were obtained through informal learning experiences with students or teachers whose racial and cultural background was different than theirs. Kasen worked as a middle school girls basketball coach prior to becoming an assistant principal. He states:

> For me, coaching an all African American girls basketball team taught me so much about myself. I did not grow up with the same background as them, so to hear everything they listened to, everything they went through on a day-to-day basis as it pertains to education and race was huge. I listened to their music, learned about their culture, gave them rides home when their parents couldn't pick them up, etc. It was these experiences that best prepared me to communicate with African American students in my role as an AP (assistant principal).

For Kasen, he quickly admitted that trying to understand and interact with African American students required time and experience, but it was those experiences that allowed him to communicate with the students and their families. For Meredith, it was a similar experience as she volunteered for different events in neighborhoods were people of color lived. "Relationships with African American students and their families make all the difference," says Meredith. She went on to add:

> I know I am White, however, most of the African American students and families I work with concerning discipline…know I have their best interest at heart. The first interaction I have with students and their families is always positive. I try to reach out first, that way when it is time for me to recommend a discipline penalty, the student and the families understand why I am doing it. Having a relationship changes the way people view and accept the punishments I hand out.

While Kasen and Meredith shared their intercultural communication with the students, Jack and Shannon highlighted how intercultural communication was important as they maintained relationships with their teaching workforce, who were predominately White and female. Jack stated:

> As a teacher and as an assistant principal, they (White teachers) would always send me the troubled African American students. Previously, when I would not approve the teachers' recommendation, I often received pushback from the teacher. Now, I take the opportunity to explain my reasoning to the teacher and listen to their explanation. Our conversation are less about placing blame and more about me supporting and developing their cultural competency with all students, but especially with African American students. This cuts down on the number of referrals in my office for minor incidents that can be proactively handled in the classroom.

The relationship between the AP and the teacher can be adversarial, particularly if the teacher views the AP as condescending towards their teaching capabilities. Also, the APs' interpersonal communication technique can play a role. For Shannon, an African American who specialized instruction and learning, her relationships with the teachers in the building was a mechanism she could influence that directly impacted school discipline. "The majority of classroom disturbances come from instruction," she stated. "I cannot personally interact with all students; however, I can interact with the teachers who were having classroom management difficulties with African American students," she added. She found herself having informative discussions with her White teachers about being aware of racial and cultural biases, while having fewer of these types of discussions with teachers of color. Just these conversations alone opened up much needed conversations about practices and policies that were seemingly neutral, but resulted in African American students being disciplined at higher rates.

The consistency in how the participants interacted with each group (e.g., students, parents, teachers, colleagues, etc.) reinforced the relationship with the collective members of the school. To accomplish this feat, the participants express their personal goal of acquiring interpersonal skills, so as to interact with individuals they did not conversate with every day. “It is different when you have them (students) in class everyday” stated Brandon, who added “because I knew what their triggers were and what types of reinforcement they responded to.” Going from instructing between 20-30 students each class period to overseeing every middle schooler in a grade level, their respective families, and teachers was a challenge noted by all of the participants. In cultivating the relationships with these groups, the participants noticed a decreased use of punitive disciplinary measures (i.e., in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions), and an increase of preventative measures. A constant reference from each participant was the need to be visible in the hallways, address African American students by their name, incorporate positive reinforcement, do not take their behaviors personally, and never try to “call-out” an African American student when reprimanding them. “If I need to discuss something with a student, I do not get into a power struggle,” stated Kasen. He added, “If possible, I bring them to the side, away from the audience and discuss expectations there, as I want to use my relationship as a deterrent rather than threatening them with discipline.” Although these measures seem simple, the participants deemed them as effective and pivotal in establishing a preventative approach to future school discipline incidents.

Discussion

The research questions pertaining to this study focused on three items: *What are assistant principal's perceptions regarding the use of specific school discipline interventions; and how do assistant principals use multiple data collection points (e.g., interpersonal relationships, school-wide data, etc.) to decrease the overreliance of suspensions and expulsions with African American students?* The findings show that their perceptions of discipline interventions and their usage of various data points changed, based on their involvement with other staff, but in particular, with African American students and their families. It cannot be ignored that while efforts to ignore race existed in their beliefs as teachers, the responsibilities of an AP exposed them to an undeniable fact; race and the factors connected to it are salient and are mitigating the educational opportunities for African American students.

Perceptions of Discipline Interventions

From a critical race lens, the participants in this study reformed their view of discipline interventions the more they obtained a non-ahistorical understanding of African American students and their families. The participants' willingness to reveal their limited perspective on the use of discipline in the classroom and its impact on the long-term academic prospects for African American students is important. The literature has shown that multiple office referrals leads to suspensions and these same suspensions can translate into arrests depending on the offense, which can negatively influence African American students' academic and extracurricular opportunities in high school and in college (Johnson, 2015; Morris & Perry, 2017; Skiba et al, 2011). The informal experiences with African American students and their families, conversations with school

personnel (e.g., other assistant principals, school counselors and the principal), and having a better understanding of their school-wide discipline data helped to construct new dispositions and reform old perspectives about race and discipline interventions. Disciplinary policies or practices on their face may appear race neutral; however, the participants' inclination towards challenging this ideology based on their lived experiences with African American students reveals an evolving, racially conscious disposition.

Forming relationships and harnessing the experiences of African American students and their families, speaks directly to critical race tenet of affirming the voices of historically marginalized groups and Armstrong's (2010) research on the socialization of APs. The findings disclose that the participants underwent an ahistorical preparation in their educational leadership program; which corroborates findings from the larger literature that educational leadership programs often prepare candidate for the role of principal, while overlooking and ignoring the critical core responsibilities that APs engage in (Armstrong, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Oleszweski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). The findings show that the participants struggled at first to internalize dispositions that were effective when working with African American students. Early in their AP tenure, their responses to student discipline aligned with protecting teachers based on their own teacher-centered dispositions, a finding which matches existing literature (Armstrong, 2009; Skiba et al., 2011). However, as participants engaged more in their socialization process their perspective on discipline altered, and they began to understand their responsibility to serve as advocates for often marginalized African American students, rather than enforcers of discipline as means to penalize students.

Interdisciplinary Reference Points

Based on a critical race framework, the acquisition of multiple references points from various formal and informal stakeholders is an affirmative, interdisciplinary practice to resolving teachers' contentions with African American students' behavior and discipline disparities. Singular approaches to redirecting behavior through suspensions only, has proved ineffective (Fabelo et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2016). Additionally, this narrow approach to discipline is rooted in an authoritative stance or culture, designed by race-neutral policies which are developed by principals, but are enforced by assistant principals (Kennedy et al., 2017). The participants use of school-wide data, parental knowledge, social worker experiences with the student, and the student's response about an alleged situation acknowledges that the office referral is not the only account of the precipitating incident. Furthermore, it highlights an important shift in how APs value the importance of story, in the everyday lives of African American students. Inferring information provides context, something that can be missing from the office referral or absent from an AP's daily interaction with a student. As suggested by Khalifa et al. (2014), the determination of these APs to infuse and critically examine the contextual framework that comprises the lives of African American students is vital for keeping historically marginalized students and their families engaged in education. Again, the desire to approach discipline in this manner stems directly from the administrative support they received from school counselors and the principals, which reaffirms the influence that principals have on disciplinary culture in their school (Kennedy et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2011).

The participants' incorporation of contextual academic and family history, resonates with the critical race tenet of the removal of ahistorical stances about whose knowledge is valid. The participants did not view themselves as the sole subject-matter expert of school discipline or African American students, but rather they sought assistance and guidance early and often. As a school leader, APs undergo an enormous responsibility of balancing the needs of the student with the instructional demands of teachers and the safety of the other students in the school. While it is important to utilize discipline for the safety of the school in severe cases that involve violence against individuals, weapons, drugs, etc., these participants place equal importance to the outside factors which could impact the student beyond their middle grade years. Embracing the whole student, rather than the need to enforce penalties for rules that were broken, speaks to the participants' willingness to use their position and authority to wield culturally responsive practices for culturally responsive outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

Conclusion and Implications

The individual interviews and the data analysis process illuminated the lived experiences of five APs, who serve as disciplinary gatekeepers in their respective middle schools. The findings offer a number of implications which can push forward research and conversations concerning APs, African American students, and school discipline. First, the codes and themes stress greater effort is needed in addressing APs in educational leadership preparation programs. Separating the AP content from the principal content would give AP candidates a stronger understanding of what will be required of them upon entering the position. In conjunction, further attempts to support

candidates seeking this position requires that educational leadership programs integrate courses that acknowledge and critically investigate race, racism, and racial disparities that subsist in education, but especially in urban schooling environments. The impact race has on factors that influence the behaviors of African American students or the behaviors of teachers, cannot be underestimated. Failing to even remotely pinpoint these issues, APs are placed in a position where they are unable to critically reflect and question the lasting effects of their decision(s) to suspend or expel a student (Young, 2010). The inability to critique school discipline policies or practices situates APs as contributors to the already debilitating school-to-prison pipeline.

Concerning these findings and how they relate to African American students, a recommendation for all education personnel is to seek immersive experiences with African Americans, outside the confines of their formal job role. Having these types of experiences with African American students allowed the participants to grasp the existence of different, yet equally important realities that their African American students live in. These realities are composited layers, which combine socioeconomics, race, gender, trauma, and the lack of support from school stakeholders with their identities as students. Unpacking these realities requires that individuals are attentive to the socioemotional needs of African American students and are frequently providing culturally affirmative supports to assist African American students in reaching their academic potential.

For school districts, the findings solidify the importance of recruiting future APs whose dispositions about student learning and discipline are race conscious, yet adaptable based on the needs of the student population they serve. The participants all benefited

from supportive principals and school counselors who exhibited empathetic qualities toward the challenges that exist for African American students, yet still offered up high expectations regarding behaviors and academic performance. As a part of the onboarding process for APs, principals should consider providing multiple mentoring resources (e.g., access to available professional development opportunities, and encouragement from school counselors and peer assistant principals), to support the AP as proprietors of discipline for their school.

Future research concerning APs must critically deconstruct (i.e., assess the function of APs in urban schools, within the school discipline continuum, and their connection to African American students as practitioners) and examine the position from a multi-tiered approach (i.e., evaluate how their function aligns with practices, policies, and approaches towards redirecting student behavior). APs do not operate in vacuum, rather this position is under the direction of their principal's disciplinary philosophy and school district's overarching doctrine toward the use of discipline. From a multi-level modeling design, prospective studies should examine district-level and principal-level dispositions on school discipline to determine if either influences APs disciplinary decisions towards African American students in urban schooling environments. As a measure to promote affirmative practices, an extended qualitative study is needed to explore the social, emotional, and cognitive capacity of APs who incorporate social justice practices when applying school discipline. Research along this path can explicate the factors that assist APs to go beyond their initial trepidation when making controversial, yet equitable decisions regarding school discipline, and into school personnel who are confident and highly effective with recommending the correct

discipline intervention for African American students. Not only is this research needed to support current and future APs, but it can directly impact how and the speed at which school disciplines policies are reformed, as APs have the potential to transition into positions of higher authority and influence (i.e., school principal, superintendent or state school board representative) inside and outside of the school building.

Finally, this research reveals that as disciplinary gatekeepers, APs have the capability and authority to implement policy changes, and have the influence to redirect and support classroom management practices of teachers. This bilateral effort is a critical function for assistant principals, who can advocate for the needs of students in urbanized communities where the benefits of education may not translate into the success of African American students. While the role of assistant principals may not be the only mechanism to diminish discipline disparities for African American students, the findings arising from this study imply that they can be the most influential.

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APPENDIX A.2

Table 2.1
Emerging Themes from Assistant Principal Interviews

Themes	Codes	Definitions
Adaptive Dispositions	Classroom Management	The values and ideas that participants entered the teaching profession with, that remained the same or evolved during their transition from teacher to assistant principal.
	Setting Standards	
	High Student Expectations	
	Teacher-Centered Philosophy	
	Structure before Relationships	
	Wanting to Impact Student Learning	
Incorporating Interdisciplinary Perspectives	Reading a Student's File	The processes or practices principals utilize to obtain information about African American students from multiple sources within the school and outside of the school, for the benefit of the student during the disciplinary process.
	Contacting Previous Principal	
	Reaching Out to the Students Family	
	Conversations with the School Social Worker	
	Conversations with Mentor(s)	
	Conversations with School Counselor	
	Conversations with the Teacher(s)	
	Gaining guidance from Other APs	
	Conferencing with Principal	
	Discussion with Student	
	Examining School-Wide Discipline Data	
	Attending Professional Development Workshops on School Discipline	
Cultivating Relationships	Being Visible in the Hallway	Developing interpersonal practices with school staff, African American students and their families, as a first measure to reducing potential school discipline consequences.
	Contact Parents Before a Major Problem Occurs	
	Speaking with Students Respectfully	
	Addressing Students by First Name	
	Creating Dialogue with Teachers	
	Addressing Student in Private Instead of Calling Them Out	
	Using Affirming Statements and Positive Youth Encouragement	

APPENDIX B.2

Interview Protocol

Warm-Up Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Prior Educational Experience

2. Tell me about your educational experiences prior to becoming an Assistant Principal?
3. Did you complete any college courses on diversity, multiculturalism, or anything that directly dealt with race?
4. Where you offered, or did you complete any courses that dealt with classroom management? If so, what was that experience like?
5. What was your overall experience with teaching?
    a. – What were the characteristics of the schools you served in? (e.g., demographics, suburban, urban, etc)
    b. – What was your philosophy on student discipline?
    c. – Were there factors that influenced your disciplinary philosophy as a teacher?

Experiences as an Assistant Principal

6. What factors motivated you to pursue a degree in educational leadership?
    a. - How many years did you teach before enrolling in your program?
    b. Are you an assistant principal at the same school you taught at?
7. What was your overall experience like in your educational leadership program?
8. Did your program offer any courses on the administrative perspectives of multiculturalism or diversity?
    a. - What courses were offered that specifically addressed school discipline or managing conflict in the school in your program?
9. Have you engaged in a professional development seminar around student discipline? If so, what did it entail and was it beneficial?
10. How much of your daily responsibilities revolve around managing student conduct (either proactively, or reactively)?
11. What are (were) some of the biggest challenges you face (or have faced) as a teacher transitioning into the role of assistant principal as it relates to student discipline?
    a. In regards to managing student conduct through discipline, has your philosophy changed since becoming an assistant principal, or during your time as an assistant principal? If so, how?
12. What factors influence the type of discipline intervention you recommend?
13. Is there an experience(s) with a student, which helped shape your view of school discipline?

a. - How did that experience at affect you, negatively or positively?

b. – In what ways did this experience prepare you for handling future disciplinary episodes students?

Interactions with Stakeholders

14. What strategies do you utilize when interacting with students or their teachers when it comes to student discipline
15. As an assistant principal, does interpersonal relationships factor into how you go about communicating with teachers, African American students, parents, your principal, and other support staff?
16. How has having a school counselor as a partner in discipline, factor into how you recommend discipline interventions for students.

Final Questions

17. Is there a question that you wished I would have asked?
18. Is there anything you else you want to share?

CHAPTER IV: Back in My Day: Principals' Reflections about African American Students and Disciplinary Practices During Their Tenure as Assistant Principals.

According to the most recent *2015-2016 Discipline Snapshot* provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Database (2018), African American students are largest recipient of school discipline outcomes such as office referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions and referrals to law enforcement based on percentages (28%), yet they only represent 15.5% of all students enrolled in P-12 schools across the U.S. An extensive portion of literature concerning school discipline disparities attributes the inequitable treatment of African American students to subjective interpretation and enforcement of school-wide, zero tolerance discipline policies by teachers and school administration (Blake, Butler, & Smith, 2015; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). While many attempts to correct this systemic issue have concentrated on teachers' understanding of classroom management, their discipline philosophy, and how both influences a teacher's interactions with African American students (Gregory et al., 2016), there is only a small portion of research dedicated to exploring the impact of school administrator on this issue (Kennedy, Murphy, & Jordan, 2017; Skiba et al., 2003).

At the school administrative level, principals and assistant principals (APs) control the application of discipline for African American students. Principals traditionally seek to focus more on the structural items of the school (e.g., school finances, school policies, instructional leadership, supervision of personnel matters, etc.) and delegate the responsibilities of handling school discipline matters to their APs (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012). APs are given the legal authority to dispense a

discipline intervention for a student's misbehavior based on state and federal statutes (Tucker, 2015). As the gatekeeper of discipline (Mason, 2007), APs are rarely recognized as a critical component in the K-12 school discipline continuum (Mertz, 2007; Weller & Weller, 2001). The studies that do explore this position indicate that APs enter their positions unprepared to handle the majority of their responsibilities and have difficulties articulating what professional supports they require (Armstrong, 2009; Glanz, 1994; Olezsewski et al., 2012; Oliver, 2005; Sun, 2011). Still, a signature component that is connected to the growth of an AP is the mentoring they receive from their principal (Gaymon, 2017). Thus, in an effort to accumulate a better understanding of the AP position, the philosophies, dispositions, values, and beliefs that precipitate discipline decisions, it is necessary to seek clarity from principals, who define the daily responsibilities of their APs.

It is quite possible, that the time away from the AP position can possibly afford principals a new perspective on the importance of the position as it relates to African American students and school discipline practices. Therefore, to gain greater insight regarding effective inclusionary practices that APs in urban schools can execute as disciplinary gatekeepers for African American students, this study sought to explore principals' experiences while they were APs, through a phenomenological methodological approach. An extensive literature review of APs connection to school discipline will be provided, along with an overview of literature concerning the participants' assessment of their own professional and personal progression as an AP. After the literature review, a clear and logical explanation of the conceptual framework known as Culturally Responsive School Leadership will be presented. After subsequent

findings are introduced and discussed, implications will be offered which have the possibility to impact P-12 schooling environment for African American students, educational leadership programs, and school discipline interpersonal practices by APs and principals.

Literature Review

The role of the AP has grown to encompass a number of duties such as designing school schedules, coaching teachers, and developing of school programs (Lightfoot, 2014). Viewed as jack-of-all-trades position, assistant principals are expected manage their time to accomplish these tasks with high efficiency. However, managing school discipline at the administrative level is the most time-consuming responsibility of APs (Barnett et al., 2012; Glanz, 1994; Hausman et al., 2002; Sun, 2011), which requires them to acquire their knowledge pertaining to school discipline from multiple sources. Novice and experienced APs assert that managing student discipline is a concept that was barely discussed in the educational leadership programs (Mertz, 2007). This is due to educational leadership programs honing in on the legalities of student discipline, versus usable techniques or the practical application of student behavior theories (Eberwin, 2008).

Educational leadership programs serve as a mandatory gateway to assistant principalship. While in these programs, individuals are immersed in learning into the specific differences between managing a classroom and managing an entire school (Mertz, 2007). Additionally, the time spent in educational leadership programs on average is quicker than the time spent in a teacher preparation program; this gives individuals less time to familiarize themselves with similarities and differences between

the assistant principal and principal position. This can set up unrealistic expectations by assistant principal candidates, who could envision their roles differently than what the assistant principal job actually entails. The disconnect between the job realities and educational leadership preparation for APs forces them to search in other areas to gain clarity regarding their discipline responsibilities. Studies have found that their understanding of discipline policies, and how they enforce discipline is shaped primarily by their prior classroom management experiences and their experiences in the position, more than the knowledge they acquired in their educational leadership program (Armstrong, 2012; Barnett et al, 2012; Burkoski, Lewis, Carpenter, Berry, & Sanders, 2015; May, 2016; Mertz, 2007; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

This is concerning because it highlights a critical junction that is being neglected. While professional development for APs could be an option, it is not viable. Professional development seminars typically address the needs and concerns of principals, and if the information is provided regarding the AP position, there is not a section that specifically addresses managing school discipline (Everett, 2016). When combining the lack of prior educational training, with a scarcity of professional development opportunities that are attuned to the demands of the position, APs seemingly rely more on their on-the-job training to gain the much-needed dispositions for their role. While conducting their on-the-job training, APs are given the full authority and autonomy to recommend discipline consequences for African American students; however, the management of discipline is in conducted with the approval from their principal (Munoz & Barber, 2011; Sanon, 2017). How APs mature in their responsibilities is directly related to the mentoring they receive from their principal (Barnett et al., 2012; May, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

Influential Factors as Perceived by Principals

The principal is the only individual in the school building who has performed the duties of a teacher and AP, yet their effectiveness as an AP is often unknown. Still, they are best suited to identify the appropriate characteristics, dispositions and skills that APs need to become effective disciplinarians, because of the years they spent serving in that capacity. Individuals on average serve in the AP position for four and a half years before transitioning into a principal position (Bastion & Henry, 2015), and almost all principals have occupied the role of AP as their first administrative role (Madden, 2008; Matthews & Crow, 2003; May, 2016; Tripken, 2006). With a large percentage of individuals who successfully transition from AP to principals, there are a limited number of studies that recount the experiences of principals in an attempt to determine which aspects made them effective at the AP position (Lightfoot, 2014; Petzko, 2008).

In regards to their transition from teacher to AP, some principals believe that there is a disconnect between the training they needed, and the training provided to them when they held the position of AP (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; May 2016). Lightfoot (2014) conducted a quantitative analysis of APs' readiness to be effective as principals. After analyzing 30 Texas public school principals' responses on a Principal Readiness Inventory questionnaire, Lightfoot found that highly prepared principals were more involved with administrative duties (i.e., filling in paperwork, instructional leadership activities, etc.) when they were assistant principals. Admittedly, the results of this study reveal a contradiction in what APs' primary duties are and the duties that APs seek to be more involved in. Principals handled the majority of instructional leadership tasks, yet Lightfoot (2014) provides a clear indication that what made these principals effective at

their current position is the willingness to transition from completing non-administrative tasks (i.e., school discipline) early on in their assistant principal tenure. Instead of devoting effort to strengthen their ability to managing conflict and becoming better at administering student discipline, some APs are striving to acquire experiences that prepare them for more instructional leadership roles (Lightfoot, 2014).

Sanon (2017) conducted a case study which focused on exploring how principals arrived at their current understanding of school discipline. The principals in this study attributed their approach or understanding of discipline practices and policies to the mentorship they received while they were an AP (Sanon, 2017). This is consistent with findings from Skiba et al. (2014) which suggest that the principals' conceptualization of discipline practices guided whether discipline was used as a preventative or punitive measure in their school. This guidance defined the how APs responded to student misconduct. APs who remain at their current school with punitive beliefs regarding discipline is one issue; however, APs are carrying these same philosophies into lateral positions in other schools, or into principalship positions without questioning the validity of the discipline philosophy or practices they learned from their mentoring principal.

The impact of a principal's philosophy on discipline can also direct the manner in which APs establish meaningful relationships with students. Everett (2016) examined what factors defined principals' professional growth while in the role of assistant principal. The principals in this study stated that the most impactful factor that shaped their growth in this position were their relationships with students and having a mentoring principal. The participants also indicated that their willingness to develop stronger relationships with African American students was defined by their mentoring

principal and the students themselves (Everett, 2016). While the participants in this study attest to student relationships and their principal mentors impacting their development as APs, there is no mention of how these relationships occurred (i.e., during disciplinary or non-discipline events), nor were there any indication of which specific professional skills were improved as the result of these relationships with African American students. It is important to unpack the experiences of APs as they interact with African American students, as APs typically have difficulties when trying to address issues of race, inequality, and diversity in their school (Sanon, 2017; Young, Madson, & Young, 2010). In schools with a large population of African American students, it is imperative that APs fully acknowledge how students and their own culture is connected to the larger school-wide culture. For APs to properly begin to incorporate African American students' cultures, while utilizing affirming discipline approaches (i.e., restorative practices) more guidance from mentoring principals who practice culturally responsive relationships with African American students is necessary (Gaymon, 2017; Johnson, 2006, 2007).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) as a framework asserts that as leaders, school administrators must adjust their practices to respond to the cultural learning and social needs of minoritized students at their school (Gay, 2010; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). This conceptual framework corresponds with Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2014) culturally relevant pedagogy and Gay's (2000) culturally responsive pedagogy. When combined both pedagogical frameworks explicitly encourage teachers to dismantle their own deficit-based dispositions towards minoritized students, and recommends that teachers incorporate the unique learning background of minoritized

students into their pedagogical practices. While these two conceptual frameworks intentionally focus on the academic learning needs of minoritized students by the way of instructional learning formats, it is impossible to dismantle systemic issues in education (i.e., school discipline disparities for African American students) without extending the framework to include other education stakeholders such as school administrators.

Schools can become transformative entities which reform the lives of the students they serve; however, such transformation requires that schools, particularly schools in urban environments, be led by culturally responsive leaders. School administrators must have a singular responsibility of reforming how their school, and every element within it, attends to issues that directly impact education outcomes for minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). In an in-depth examination of literature that supports CRSL, Khalifa et al. (2016) revealed that individuals exhibiting CRSL behaviors steep themselves in anti-oppressive/racist, transformative and social justice beliefs and practices which enables them to challenge institutional practices, while embedding authentic cultural practices of the students they serve into innovative policies and norms in their school. Critically important are culturally responsive leaders' capability to influence teachers' ability to instruct and improve student achievement, through trust, transparency, and improve student behavior through establishing strong relationships with the individual student and their family (Giles, Johnson, Brooks, & Jacobson, 2005; Khalifa, 2013).

From an CRSL framework, this study seeks to explore how principals, while serving as assistant principals garnered culturally responsive practices; and to what extent did their experiences influence their beliefs and transform their understanding/willingness

to reform traditionally race-neutral policies and processes as it relates to school discipline in urban schools with concentrated population of African American students. From this overarching theme, three interrelated research questions were formed: (1) *How have principals' perceptions of the assistant principal role changed due to their interactions with African American students, (2) What type of experiences with African American students helped principals form their discipline philosophy or practices as assistant principals, and (3) What types of guidance or mentorship is provided to APs in regards to managing student discipline in urban schools?*

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to phenomenologically explore the experiences of principals when they were APs at urban middle schools, with a predominately African American student enrollment. Since the act of disciplining African American students is a unique situation, it is important to capture the authentic perspective of principals, as they entered into and went through these events. A phenomenological method was chosen as it allowed for the participants to better describe the meanings behind their experiences as APs and this introduces the potential for central themes to be established based on interconnected experiences between participants (Mertens, 2014).

Participants

Each participant was selected, due to their willingness to admit their reformed stance on school discipline practices in select conversation before the study began. Four principals from four urban middle schools in the southeastern region of the U.S. were recruited for this research study. They were chosen through snowball sampling and convenience sampling, which is the recruitment of future participants from a referral of a

current participant and the selection of participants based on the researcher's ability to contact them with relative ease (Mertens, 2014). Eligibility for this study required that participants were current principals in an urban middle school. Additionally, potential participants were prescreened to ensure that prior to serving in their current position as principal that their tenure as an AP was in an urban middle school. The explanation behind choosing participants with an urban middle school background is that literature has indicated that middle schoolers experience the highest rates of student misconduct, and nationally, African American students account for the largest portion of middle school office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2011).

By having principals who worked in an urban middle school as an AP, there is a higher probability that they will have experienced a plethora of disciplinary scenarios that served to influence how they view the AP position currently. Lastly, when considering what classifies as an urban school, this study focused on two qualifications: the largest ethnic group was African American students, and the school had a student enrollment with high percentage (over 50%) of student's whose socioeconomic background was below the government poverty standard, as indicated by percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch, as self-reported by the participant.

Two White females, an African American male and African American female were interviewed. It is worth noting that two of the participants have recently obtained a doctoral degree in educational leadership and the other two are currently in doctoral program for curriculum and instruction; this is an aspect that could impact their perceptions of past experiences due to exposure to advance courses on race, culture, and school which have activated their "critical consciousness". Matthew is an African

American male who worked as an AP for four years. Prior to becoming an AP, he served as an educational consultant for a southeastern non-profit organization. He worked a year-long internship as an assistant principal before becoming an AP for an urban, high-suspending middle school. After being promoted he has served the last eight years as a principal at an urban middle. His current school has decreased the number of suspensions for African American students, however, African American students are still disproportionately suspended when compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the school. Matthew is currently enrolled as a doctoral student, with a concentration on curriculum and instruction in K-12 schools.

Amelia is an African American female who has 13 years of experience as a principal. Her previous three years were as an AP, but before that she undertook internship as an AP for a year. The semester before this interview, she completed her doctoral degree in educational leadership. She spent two years as an assistant principal at an urban elementary school. She followed up that position with obtaining an AP position at an urban middle school and suburban high school, before applying for her current principal position. Her school discipline outcomes indicate that African American students are suspended at proportionate rates as their peers.

Marilyn is a White female whose current principal tenure has lasted nine years. She also has six years of AP experience. She was in the classroom for six years before ascending the position of assistant principal. Previously, she was an assistant principal at an urban middle school and a suburban high school. She participated in a year-long internship before assuming the role of assistant principal. Under her guidance, her current school is working to decrease the overuse of suspensions for all students, but in

particular, African American students. She obtained her doctoral degree specializing in educational leadership.

Angela is a White female who has 21 years in education as either a teacher, AP or principal. For nine years she was a mathematics teacher in a high-poverty, urban high school. Upon completing her education leadership program, she obtained an assistant principalship position at same the school where she works at now as the principal. She worked in the capacity of AP for six years. The school, is recorded as having the lowest suspension rates for African American students in their district for the past several years. She is currently seeking a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction, with an urban focus.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview process was used to collect from the participants. The semi-structured method provided the flexibility needed to probe the participants on specific answers which required more clarification or more indepthness. The interview questions followed a protocol which centered on the categories such as the participant's previous discipline experiences, the influential factors that altered their discipline practices, how impactful were their interactions were with African American students, and what mentorship did they receive from their supervising principal. Again, these interview categories were an extension of the guiding research questions. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes in the participant’s office.

Each interview was conducted in person and audiotaped. Upon the conclusion of the interview, the researcher transcribed the interview within 48 hours to ensure accuracy, and the transcribed interview was transmitted electronically to the participant. The

transmittal of the transcript was done to ensure that if there were any mistakes or misconceptions regarding how something was said, that the participant could provide clarification. During the transcription process, the researcher removed all identifiable information regarding the participant, any school personnel, and the location of the school(s). All names in this study were removed and replaced with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

To form a stronger analysis of the participant's responses, a constant comparative method was used throughout the research process. As interviews were completed, the analysis would consist of comparing phrases from participants' responses, to those of other participants so as to search for common phrases, trends, or specific jargon, and to strategically compile open, axial, and selective codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviews were individually analyzed, then compared in pairs and in different groups utilizing the qualitative analytic software, ATLAS.ti. After extensively processing multiple comparisons between the transcripts, opens codes were developed for chunks of data that resembled each other. Upon establishing an extensive number of open coding, the data was then sifted through again to establish relationships between the open codes and transform them into axial codes. Lastly, as core elements were found between the axial codes, selective coding was conducted to centralize the axial codes into a core category that reflected the story being presented by the participants (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

Positionality

As a measure to increase exposure to the reality within the lived experiences of the participants, bracketing was used to isolate potential personal biases from the

researcher (Groenewald, 2004). Bracketing involves limiting opinions and dwelling in the facts of what the participants indicated in their interviews. Due to the researcher not being a current or former assistant principal or principal, it is conceivable to have selected assumptions about the role these individuals exist in while carrying out their disciplinary responsibilities. Caution was exerted in an effort to limit assumptions about the experiences discussed by the participants. This assisted the researcher in being an active listener to what the participants had to share about their tenure as assistant principals.

Findings

Upon reviewing the transcripts for key phrases and terms, 76 items were tagged as relevant. Items included covered a wide range of aspects, such as discipline philosophy, culturally responsive practices, school culture, educational leadership preparation, mentor principal's discipline philosophy, and cultural competency. As the items were coded, the phrases were clustered into 16 items, and ultimately three emergent themes were formed; assistant principal development and support, factors influencing discipline interventions, and culturally responsive discipline practices. The findings and emergent themes directly address each of the research questions (see Table 3.1).

Concerning the research question that explores principals' change in perspective about the assistant principal role due to their interactions with African American students, participants became to view the assistant principal role less as a "military-style" enforcer of discipline and more as an advocate of a student's social well-being. The second research question centered on the types of experiences that formed the participants discipline philosophy. This question is answered through numerous transformative

episodes or events that participants experienced, which challenged their own ideologies and implicit biases about African Americans, and caused them to dismantle their idea about the purpose of schooling in the context of an urban community. Rather than continually subscribing to their own understanding and beliefs, the participants indicated their willingness to use "conflict" to realign their disciplinary philosophy and practices to better serve the needs of African American students. These experiences for the participants unveiled an important concept: preventive/restorative practices towards African American students minimized or even eliminated previously persistent discipline issues. In relation to the third research question that examines the types of guidance or mentorship each participant received, the findings suggest that each experienced a comprehensive assortment of guidance (both formal and informal) from across the education stakeholder spectrum, but that it was sparse from their principal. Interspersed amongst the themes are salient findings that can benefit the current and next generation of assistant principals in urban schools, an immediately curtail unwarranted discipline sanctions against African American students.

Assistant Principal Development and Support

Each participant in the study firmly indicated that the majority of their educational leadership program courses did not provide them with the knowledge necessary to manage student behaviors and effectively implement discipline interventions. Each of the four participants completed a year-long internship, and they found that this on-the-job training was the most effective. Marilyn indicated:

> When it comes to learning how to manage relationships and how to be responsive to the needs of students, particularly African American students, the best experience is learning on the job. My education leadership program, was efficient

> at covering topics regarding the law and theoretical ideas of school discipline, but these were tools that did not benefit me on a day-to-day basis.

For Marilyn and the other participants, their development as APs rested primarily on the principal, other APs, the students they served and key stakeholders such as the school counselor and the school resource officer. Each participant indicated that when they first arrived at their position, discipline decisions were firmly decided after conferring with their principal. Matthew, the African American male insisted that while he had been provided the authority to pick which discipline intervention to use, he often conferred with other APs before bringing it to the attention of the principal. He states:

> Look, our principal made us the principal of our grade level. We were responsible for all disciplinary decisions, which meant we could send a student to in-school suspensions or out of school suspension. Still early on, I asked a ton of questions to my colleagues on how a situation should be handled. The only time I was required to confer with the principal is if the discipline intervention was in response to a weapon or drugs, or if it required that a student be expelled from the school.

Matthew's sentiment is echoed by the other participants in the study. Each participant indicated that as they gained more experience in their position they became more familiar with the school culture and discipline policies, and relied less on their principal for guidance. For most participants, they indicated that the discipline philosophy of their school principal was not student centered, and that this influenced their understanding of how discipline was to be applied at their school. While they adhered to their principal's discipline philosophy, the participants stated that after a period of time, typically by the third year, they began to incorporate input from African American students, their families, and school counselors.

A significant factor contributing to each participants' social, professional, and personal development was their ability to see themselves as advocates of African

American students in urban schools. While principals are often selected by district superintendents based on a specific match, each participant specifically chose their first AP position based on being able to make a difference in the lives of African American students. Each chose to serve at an urban middle school, and each specifically indicated that initially there was a learning curve. Regardless of racial background, each of the participants indicated that working with African American students requires forming better communication skills and developing the understanding that background (i.e., family, socioeconomics, and education) matters. For example, Amelia, an African American female directly chose to work at a Title I middle school, but indicated that it was a change from her teaching at an elementary, high-income, school:

> For me, entering a middle school in the role of assistant principal was different because despite our racial match, I still needed to understand the culture of African American students, in order to best serve them. Students at the middle school level are going through a tremendous number of changes, and at first, I did take their misbehavior as a direct sign of disobedience. However, as I began to challenge myself to know the students more, I changed as an administrator and how I administered discipline evolved as well.

Another participant, Angela who is a White female, indicated that her development as an administrator hinged directly on her ability to put herself in uncomfortable situations, to learn more about African American students. She expressed that:

> I am a White woman and I fully understood that I needed to know more about my students particularly African American students who made up the majority of my school. While my principal provided me with the do's and don'ts of discipline, developing a sense of empathy and high expectations of student behavior came from listening to African American students and their families. There are bumps and learning lessons along the way, but I never regret the experiences I had, because they helped me become a better assistant principal.

The supports given to the participants impacted their perception about position and their perceptions provides a backdrop for understanding how discipline is applied in the participants' school.

Factors Influencing Discipline Interventions

In the beginning, each participant admitted that they would see a violation of rules as a black and white issue. Matthew indicated, “because if we do not set the rules and expectations accordingly, students, especially in middle school, will get away with anything they can”. The participants agreed that when it came to factors influencing their decision regarding discipline, they only considered the violation and the policy involved with that violation. Angela states:

> When there was a fight, as a young assistant principal I went directly by the book. I did not address any background information about how the fight started, student history, or other factors.

As participants became more comfortable with their role as disciplinary arbiters, each expressed their willingness to seek contextual information from multiple sources, prior to recommending a discipline intervention. Factors that influenced their discipline decision ranged from student history, offense type, the number of prior offenses a student had on their record, the teacher who referred the student, family relationship with the school, school counselor input, and student accountability. Matthew expressed that he relied heavily on the school counselor. He also stated that his decisions were based on the best interest of the child and the teacher.

> It became a crucial part of my discipline process. I needed to weigh multiple facts before I made a decision. When I was a student, administrators just disciplined me without considering my background or my input. I wanted to do something different. I wanted students to know that I talked to the counselor, their peers, their family members, before I

> came with my decision. Without looking at the whole picture, how could I recommend a decision that met the needs of the whole child?

Matthew, along with the other participants agreed that as they matured in their position, it was not enough just to discipline a student. Disciplining a student without proper context penalizes the student and not the behavior in question. The participants indicated that the role of the AP evolved while they were in that position, and has continued to evolve since that time; all because of the various amount of data that is readily available. "I could look up a student's file to see prior issues, as well as their strengths when they were elementary school," stated Marilyn. She goes on to indicate:

> When incorporating knowledge from guardians and information from the school counselor, I was able to create a better picture of the student. This allowed me to use positive reinforcement to correct minor behavior issues. For more serious infractions, I tended to utilize less severe interventions first, such as silent detention, in-school suspensions, before having to recommend an out-of-suspensions.

Lastly, while not stressed upon heavily, the participants did indicate that teachers' dispositions toward discipline, and African American students influenced if they would reprimand a student. "If I saw constant referrals from a certain teacher's who was known to have poor classroom management skills, I would purposely not suspend a student," says Amelia. The participant sought to focus more on improving the instructional capabilities and classroom management of select teachers, before engaging in reprimanding the student with a harsh discipline intervention. Their thought process was that if they could address these classroom issues first, it would decrease the number of African American students who were referred out the classroom for behaviors that are the result of disengagement.

Responsive Discipline Practices

The final emergent theme centered on specific practices, that the participants utilized as assistant principals when engaging African American students, either proactively, or reactively. The participants indicated that culturally responsive practices were the result of trial and error, and were developed through having formal and informal experiences with African American students. "How and when you address African American students as an AP is crucial if you want them to respond effectively," states Angela. For the participants, utilizing positive reinforcement during interactions, communicating clear expectations, and isolating students instead of calling them out in class were mentioned numerous times. Marilyn stated:

> The first time you discipline a student, should not be the first interaction you had with them. As an assistant principal, I purposefully interacted on a positive note with all my students, but especially with African American students. I needed to set a standard that our relationship was not just about discipline, but accountability and high expectations.

Each of the participants signaled that culturally responsive discipline practices were a significant portion of their day. Whereas some students responded well to administrators being in close proximity, others did not. The participants echoed that some students responded well to just being able to vent their frustrations, in a safe space, due to their past traumatic experiences at home. Angela recalled a situation with an African American student, who had an individualized education plan (IEP) and would constantly get into trouble:

> I would communicate with the mom that I needed to suspend the student out-of-school. This was primarily because the student would sleep throughout every class he was in. In talking with the social worker, I found out that the family was homeless often, and since the student was older than 13, he couldn't stay in the homeless shelter with his mother. So, he would stay in a transitional living space with adult men, and stay up all

> night just to make sure nothing happened to him. The mother would have nowhere to send him when he was suspended, so she would let him stay in the car while she went to work during the day.

Knowing this information altered the manner in which Angela administered discipline when the student got into trouble. His schedule was adjusted to have fewer intensive classes during the morning, and when the student was reprimanded for alleged misbehavior, Angela would not give him an out-of-school suspension, but rather give him an in-school suspension. It prevented him from losing instructional time and eased the possibility of the student being endangered by roaming the streets during the day or being left in the mother's car unsupervised.

The aforementioned example parallels a number of instances that were mentioned by the participants. The participants exhibited changes in their disciplinary practices based on the socioeconomic and cultural background of the student. Each participant stated that while the position of AP has remained the same (i.e., a significant portion of their day spent managing student behaviors), the difference between their tenure in the role when it pertains to discipline and now, is that there is more support for APs currently. Amelia reported:

> When I was an assistant principal, there were few if any professional development seminars that pertained to discipline. Currently, the district offers at least a minimum of one day of discipline data review, and will go over certain disciplinary scenarios with all of the assistant principals in the district. While it may not detail the interpersonal relationships needed to be effective in the position…it is more than what I received at the time.

The other three participants highlighted similar changes with the position and the type of support they received pertaining to managing discipline at their school. All agreed that the best support for developing culturally responsive practices in the school stems from

establishing relationships with students and having a supportive administrative team who can provide different perspectives on the lives of the students in the school.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of principals, while they were APs in predominately African American, urban middle schools. The four individuals in the sample all served over a decade educating African American students either as a teacher, an AP, or a principal. Half of the participants enrolled in the study are current doctoral students and the other two already completed their doctoral degree. For the participants in the study, each attributed their ability to implement culturally responsive disciplinary practices to their principal, whose philosophy on student discipline was student oriented. From a culturally responsive school leadership theoretical framework, this finding suggests that efforts to create APs with the passion to educate in urban schools, starts with culturally responsive principals whose philosophy is centered on advocating for students' needs. As mentioned by each of the participants, the support they received regarding how to discipline students, particularly African American students, revolved around the participants ability to confer with and receive guidance from their principal. While each agreed that they needed more previous experience concerning discipline practices and the nuances of working with African American students, culturally responsive school leaders recognize that their effectiveness comes from their willingness to learn and adapt to the needs of the students in their school.

The responses from the participants are similar to Oleswezski et al. (2012), highlighting that APs overall professional growth or socialization rests heavily on the experiences they encounter with their principal, other school staff, students and their

parents (Everett, 2016). This is also true for how APs learn how to establish effective disciplinary measures for African American students. Earlier in their tenure, the participants indicated they would confer often with their principal, but as time went on, they began to confer less with the principal and more with other assistant principals and the counselors in the school. As a second progression, the participants appeared to have shifted into a more wholistic model by consciously incorporating the lived perspectives of African American students and their families. Participants' willingness to address the cultural needs of students, parents, as well as the school staff is a direct example of CRSL behaviors. Furthermore, the awareness of the participants highlights a level of critical consciousness, which is something that each of the participants acknowledges as being absent earlier in their tenure; but appearing only after constantly reflecting on the negative impacts of punitive discipline recommendation via interactions with African American students. The continuous improvement acknowledges that a singular, decontextualized approach to disciplining African American students is deficit based; and that if schools as an institution of change are to establish a culture of responsiveness towards African American students, it is imperative that APs gain a heighten level of critical consciousness and utilize their power and authority to promote inclusiveness (Giles et al., 2005).

The findings indicate that while the participants spent a number of years instructing and disciplining African American students, each required further guidance and mentoring from their principals so to better understand how the position of AP differed from the teachers' as it relates to handling student misconduct. The participants fully admitted that they were provided the power and legal authority to suspend students,

from the initial day they arrive in the position. However, they began to realize that their most effective practices when concerning disciplining African American students began with practicing culturally responsive preventative measures, rather than solely relying on reactive exclusionary practices.

Each participant indicated their passion for providing alternative disciplinary outlets for students, and this was due in part to their own evolving awareness of the structural oppressive forces that predicated student misbehavior, or promoted teachers' implicit biases, through a critical consciousness. Again, the acknowledgement of their own critical conscious could be the result of their increased exposure to advanced discourse on race, identity, racism, and systemic education issues through their doctoral courses. Furthermore, in developing a critical consciousness the participants could not directly pinpoint when they became self-aware of issues, biases, and the contextual factors influencing the decisions; however, they agreed that each day at their school, each interaction with African American students, staff, and other stakeholders, became a collective transformative experience which changed them for the better. Still, this stance of advocacy, while it took some time to develop from encountering numerous disciplinary experiences with African American students, connects directly with CRSL. Understanding over time that African American students in urban middle schools, enter the classroom with a plethora of marginalizing factors (i.e., racial oppression, culture discrimination, high-poverty neighborhoods, etc.), the participants intentionally worked to develop relationships with students and then each participant harnessed those relationships to provide more preventative practices as a measure to redirect actually

student misbehavior, and to confront the implicit or explicit biases teachers displayed in their discipline decisions.

Lastly, CRSL stresses that individuals who exhibit these behaviors and qualities must remain vigilant towards reforming school for the better. As it pertains to school discipline, school administrators are charged not only with critically examining the behaviors of students, but also the policies and practices that allow teachers and themselves to reprimand African American students. The participants expressed that at first, it was difficult to address teachers or challenge policies which were implicitly or explicitly biased against African American students. This corresponds with prior research which has explicated the difficulties that APs have with issues in their school relating to race and racism (Sanon, 2017; Young et al., 2010). However, as they reached a level of critical consciousness (to which they were unaware of at the time) that better understood the dynamics and long-lasting impact around discipline decisions, the participants openly sought to reform any practice or policy that supported the oppression of African American students – which often put them at odds with teachers, other colleagues, principals, and school district officials.

Implications

Exploring the lived experiences of the participants, as they executed the duties of AP in urban middle schools, reveals a number of executable solutions to support APs. In regards to educational leadership program the findings indicate that while the courses in education leadership programs help to prepare APs to understand school discipline as a legal matter, these programs should include courses that address school discipline practices and philosophies for APs. The course(s) must also integrate job training

experience, both formal and informal, around culturally responsive leadership particularly in urban settings with a high African American student population. Providing these supports for APs will serve to better prepare them to enter the position, willing to utilize less punitive disciplinary interventions because of their inclination to consider the contextual factors behind the alleged misbehavior (i.e., family makeup, potential implicit or explicit teacher bias, zero tolerance discipline policies, etc.). Directly addressing the difference between the assistant principal and principal as it relates to school discipline responsibilities, educational leadership programs can assist their candidates to enter the position as advocates of preventative or restorative practices; both of which would serve to decrease subjective discipline infractions for African American students.

The findings also shed light potential opportunity for culturally responsive professional development for APs around school discipline. A large portion of the participants' development as culturally responsive leaders was dictated by their ability to develop and sustain relationships with African American students and their families. Utilizing a wholistic approach when working with students seemed to produce better results and that reduced the participants' use of punitive discipline interventions. While the participants noted they were rarely support by the principal, their desire for professional development could have expedited their transition into leaders who advocated for African American students to remain in school, despite disciplinary infractions. Continuous professional development will help APs examine their own short-comings, and allow them to partake in learning experiences that offer best-practices that can be used when interacting with African American students and their families. Furthermore, culturally responsive leadership professional developments can help APs

formulate stronger measures to confront teachers' who are reluctant to address the racial bias that is often associated with discipline referrals and African American students. School districts must make this more than just a day-long professional development and offer quarterly meetings which allow APs across the district to convene and share best practices for urban school settings.

In examining the experiences of principals when they were in their respective roles as assistant principals, the findings illuminate possible future research on school discipline, African American students, and discourse on assistant principal development. A noticeable element in the findings is the reluctance of the participants to leave urban schools once becoming a principal. Forthcoming research should examine the factors, specifically related to culturally responsive school leadership, which aid in assistant principals wanting to remain in historically under-resourced schools that educate a large African American student population. Additionally, an extension of this study must explore assistant principal and principal collaborations to identify, assess, and adapt district-wide policies to meet the particular needs of middle school students. As noted previously, middle school serves as a significant timeframe where the number of school discipline infractions increase, yet, more research is required on how collectively, school administrators can alleviate this issue with more pragmatic, culturally responsive student-centered policies and practices.

Conclusion

In parting, the purpose of this study was to explore the previously lived experiences of principals, as they served as APs in urban middle school with a predominately African American student enrollment. The exploration of their

experiences, as it pertains to school discipline, reveals that culturally responsive practices are the result of mentorship from colleagues whose ideology and practices are student-centered. Alongside the mentorship they received, the participants' immersion with African American students and their families, and having a critical introspective lens towards themselves aided the participants with cultivating inclusive disciplinary practices in challenging urban environments.

The mythology behind urban schools as flashpoints of high-stakes testing underperformance resulting in harsh disciplinary outcomes for African American cannot be ignored, yet if African American students in urban schooling environments are to reach their full academic potential, assistant principals as culturally responsive school leaders must play a central part. When reforming urban schools into places of safety and support for historically disenfranchised communities, assistant principals must address and recalibrate practices and personnel through a restorative, equity-centered framework. Moreover, any attempt to reclassify the assistant principal position beyond the traditional model of "disciplinary gatekeeper" necessitates that educational leadership programs in partnership with current assistant principals and principals, question the culturally and racially "color-blind" ideology that is pervasive in education leadership preparation programs and in-service professional development seminars. These stakeholders must institute new measures that acknowledge race and culture as signature foundational elements in the construction of new inclusive discipline practices and policies. The issue of school discipline disparities for African American students has existed for quite some time, yet research is just recently reaching the proverbial doorsteps of assistant principals

– who just may be the best countermeasure to school discipline disparities in urban schools.

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APPENDIX A.3

Table 3.1
Themes, Codes, and Definitions Arising from Principal Interviews

Theme	Codes	Definitions
Assistant Principal Development and Support	Principal's Style of Mentoring	Influential factors which dictated the growth, or the lack there of, for participants in the pursuit of becoming an effective assistant principal, and to better understand the application of school discipline in urban school settings
	Lack of Educational Leadership Courses on School Discipline Practices	
	Lack of Professional Development Opportunities	
	Conferring with Supervising Principal	
	Internship Experience	
	Networking with Social Workers, School Counselors and other Assistant Principals	
	Allowed to Advocate for Students	
Factors Influencing Discipline Interventions	Principal's Discipline Philosophy	Items and individuals that participants often relied upon to guide their daily disciplinary decisions with African American students. Participants would draw upon one or multiple aspects based on the type of offense and the relationship they had with the student.
	Policy Violation	
	Student's Discipline Background	
	School Staff (i.e., school counselor, social worker, etc.)	
	Teachers' Dispositions Towards Discipline & African American Students	
Culturally Responsive Discipline Practices	Reformation of School Discipline Policy	The examination of practices, policies, and approaches both internal to the participant and within the school culture that serve to redesign how behavior modification meet the needs of the African American students.
	Incorporating Multiple Points of Reference	
	Empathetic to the Needs of Students from Different Backgrounds	
	Utilization of Discretion when Working with Students	
	Incorporating the Experiences of African American Students	

APPENDIX B.3

Interview Protocol

Warm-Up Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Educational Experience & Professional Experience

2. Tell me about your educational experiences that lead up to you becoming an assistant principal?
    a. How long were you an assistant principal?
    b. Is your current position at the same school where you served as an assistant principal? If so, what factors influenced your decision to stay?
3. During your time as an assistant principal what experiences with other school personnel (i.e., school counselors, school security officer, etc.) shaped your discipline philosophy?
5. What was your principal's perspective of the role of student discipline?
    a. How has that shaped your discipline philosophy or discipline practices?
6. How often did you confer with the principal about discipline?
    a. When you conferred with the principal about discipline, was it beneficial? If so, how?
7. How did your interactions with other assistant principals, shape your discipline practices?
8. Were you involved in any professional development seminars in regards to managing student behavior or discipline?
    a. If so, how often did you participate in a professional development seminar?
    b. Was this a voluntary or mandatory seminar? In mandatory, who mandated it?
9. What experience(s) with students, shaped your discipline philosophy or practices?
    a. How did you incorporate the needs of the students when recommending a discipline intervention?

Perceptions of Assistant Principal Role

9. Has your perception of the assistant principal role changed now that you are in your current position? If so, how?
10. In what way has the assistant principal role changed, since you have taken on the principal position?
11. What are some opportunities that you wished you had as an assistant principal?
12. Are your views of student misconduct or discipline the same or different now?
    a. What has caused your view to remain the same or change?
13. Is there a difference between what the assistant principal needs to know and what the principal needs to know concerning student discipline?

14. In terms of support with student misbehavior and discipline, do you provide more or less support for your assistant principal, than what you received when you were in that position?

Final Questions

16. Is there a question that you wished I would have asked?
17. Is there anything you else you want to share?

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Across the United States a reoccurring trend is the disproportionate application of school discipline towards African American students. Labeled as a key contributor to the opportunity gap between African American and White students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), school discipline remains a substantial issue that is comprised of multiple interconnected factors. Existing literature on this systemic issue concentrates on three stakeholders; African American students' behaviors, the cultural competency and classroom management capabilities of teachers, and principals' philosophies about the use of discipline (DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Moussavi Saeedi, 2017; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). While research on these stakeholders is significant (Coggshall, Osher, & Colombi, 2013; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez, & Cummings, 2016) there is a tendency to gloss over assistant principals' responsibilities as disciplinarians, and their role in either promoting or mitigating discipline disparities for African American students.

The overarching purpose for this dissertation examined the particular responsibilities, dispositions and preparation of assistant principals as it applies to school discipline practices. This process involved examining the position with a mixed methodology, interconnecting multiple perspectives (i.e., teachers, assistant principals, and principals) through a quantitative and qualitative research design. The secondary aim of this research design was to begin to fill in the void concerning assistant principals and their potential influence on discipline outcomes for African American students in middle school. The use of school level data from five, racially diverse school districts in North Carolina, and personal experiences captured through semi-structured interviews, presents

a micro and macro level depiction of school discipline and the complex manner to which assistant principals are prepared to manage student behaviors (and teachers' behaviors) that lead to those outcomes.

The findings from this dissertation indicate the following: a) African American students have a higher risk of receiving an out-of-school suspension in urban middle schools when compared rural or suburban schools; b) teachers in the sample do not perceive their school administrators (assistant principals and principals) to be consistent with enforcing school rules as it concerns discipline; c) school administrators' consistent enforcement of school rules is correlated with a lower out-of-school suspensions risk for African American students; d) assistant principals receive little formal preparation for their position from their educational leadership program; e) a substantial amount (i.e., daily interactions and discussions about students and school discipline practices) of professional development is conducted through mentorship from principal to assistant principal; f) assistant principals become more effective at the position in regards to preventing punitive discipline or recommending the correct discipline the more they rely on education stakeholders (i.e., parents, school counselors, social workers, other assistant principals, and teachers, etc.) for input; and g) school discipline for assistant principals in urban schools encompasses a complex number of issues (e.g., poverty, class, gender, etc.) which requires them to develop a heightened sense of racial awareness, cultural empathy, and social advocacy for African American students.

Detailed Summary of Findings

Within the context of developing a more cohesive understanding of assistant principals and their connection to school discipline for African American students, each

study investigated its own set of independent, yet interconnected, research questions. Each research question and the finding to that question are captured below:

Study One

Research Question 1: *Can urban middle school teachers' perceptions of consistency about their school administrators' enforcement of school discipline rules predict African American students' risk of receiving an out-of-school suspension?* The findings show that prediction is possible, with higher ratings of consistency relating to a lower out-of-school suspension risk for African American students.

Research Question 2: *Do teachers in middle school perceive their school administrators to be consistent with enforcing school rules?*

Overall, teachers across school type (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) perceived that their school administrators were not consistent when enforcing school discipline rules.

Study Two

Research Question 1: *What are assistant principals' perceptions regarding the use of specific school discipline interventions.* The participants indicated a reluctance to remove a student through out-of-school suspension for non-violent offenses after they receiving additional guidance and mentoring. As they engulfed themselves in their responsibilities as disciplinarians, they became increasingly focus on utilizing interventions that were preventative (i.e., high expectations, positive verbal prompts, silent lunch, etc.) rather than reactive

interventions (i.e., in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions) that resulted in a loss of academic instruction.

Research Question 2: *How do assistant principals use multiple data collection points to decrease the overreliance of suspensions and expulsions for African American students?* It was found that discipline interventions were decided based on school-level factors (i.e., school discipline data for the middle school and elementary school) and student-level factors (i.e., socioeconomics, family life, academic performance, and behavioral history). The assistant principals in this study gathered antecedent information about the student and the incident that led to the student's removal from the class. The process of collecting information on the student extended past just reviewing the office referral and into conducting multiple interviews with the student, the social worker, the school counselor, and the referring teacher. These methods allow the assistant principal to recommend a suitable disciplinary intervention that best meets needs of the student, or support the teacher who may not have a firm grasp on effectively managing a classroom with African American students.

Study Three

Research Question 1: *How have principals' perception of the assistant principal role changed due to their interactions with African American students?* Exposure to African American students caused principals to insist that assistant principals receive additional preparation through

educational leadership programs that directly relates to working in urban school contexts. Additionally, principals' interactions with African American students, while they were assistant principals, have resulted in stronger measures to mentor and support assistant principals as they navigate how to manage student behaviors through discipline. Finally, their perception of the position has change in that they believe assistant principals should remain in their capacity for longer time periods to help solidify school structure and support African American students in urban schools.

Research Question 2: *What type of experiences with African American students helped principals form their discipline philosophy or practices as assistant principals?* The types of experiences which reframed the participants discipline philosophies and practices consisted of interactions with African American students and the contexts that created the discipline infractions. This would typically involve the participant, inquiring about the student’s home life and academic challenges, but also their areas of strength in school. Participants would shift from a deficit practitioner mentality regarding discipline, and search for strategies through internal and external stakeholders, to mitigate internal and external issues which would decrease the non-acceptable behavior by the student or the recommending teacher. Furthermore, each candidate was selected due to their admittance of having transformative experiences with

African American students, which led to awakening of their critical consciousness.

Research Question 3: *What types of guidance or mentorship is provided to APs in regards to managing student discipline in urban schools?*

Participants willingly admitted that in their educational leadership program, guidance about the intricate responsibilities of school discipline is only about school law and student rights. The first-time participants found themselves on the recipient end of guidance and mentoring with managing this responsibility upon entering their respective schools. The principals in this study formalized their development as an assistant principal through the mentorship they received partially from their principals and fellow assistant principals. Additional guidance was provided to them through their relationships with guidance counselors, social workers, and community members. The participants stressed the need for more professional development through their school district, as previous professional development opportunities rarely covered this topic.

The Interconnection Between Studies and their Individual Contributions

The collective aim of these studies was to create a new foundational understanding of the critical role that the assistant principal can assume, to confront and reduce discipline disproportionality for African American students. Individually, each study offers a unique perspective regarding the challenges and areas of promise concerning the maturation of assistant principals. Chapter II addresses the need for school administrators to dispense disciplinary outcomes for African American students with

more consistency; as the findings concluded that there was a negative relationship between teachers' perceptions of consistency and out-of-school suspensions for African American students. What is revealing about these finds is that the concept of vertical inconsistency (Irby & Clough, 2015), is influencing school discipline for the North Carolina middle schools in the study. Furthermore, the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, as an indicator of the level of students living at or below the federal poverty line, was found to predict suspensions for African American students. This finding shows that race along with class is a strong predictor of African Americans students being removed from school through out-of-school suspensions.

Through the theoretical framework of institutional theory, how and why African American students receive out-of-school suspensions from school administrators (e.g., who are primarily assistant principals as determined in Chapter III and Chapter IV), has caused the teachers' in this study to redefine what out-of-school suspensions should be used for. This lack of consistent enforcement as perceived by teachers relates to Madhalangobe and Gordon (2012) findings about the importance of school administrators being transparent with their disciplinary decisions. The transparency between school administrators and teachers creates a space where each can discuss the rationale behind the decision to discipline a student, but it also allows gives teachers the ability to positively impact school discipline policies and practices (Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016; Madhalangobe & Gordon, 2012).

The findings in Chapter III illustrate the complex decision-making process of assistant principals as it pertains to school discipline. It also reveals that numerous school related and non-school related factors can influence assistant principals' refinement of

their decision-making process. What cannot be overlooked is how structural instability in a school can drastically impact students' behaviors, teacher retention, teachers' decreased tolerance of perceived misbehavior, and how assistant principals perform their job functions. Five assistant principals at two urban middle schools were interviewed individually. While one school was considered underperforming and the other was exceeding performance standards, each school contended with discipline related issues for African American students. This corresponds with the literature about how assistant principals spend a large portion of their day dealing with discipline (Glanz, 1994, 2004; Kennedy, Murphy, & Jordan, 2017, Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012).

The participants readily exclaimed their tentative nature towards school discipline early in their assistant principal tenure. Yet daily, these individuals sought the expertise of school personnel (i.e., the principal and other assistant principals). This finding corresponds with literature highlighting that assistant principals' development within the school hinges directly on the interactions they have with the principal of the school (Barnett et al., 2012; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

Young, Madsen, and Young (2010) found that school administrators, early on in their career, find themselves unable to address issues of race and racism when it appeared in traditional school functions such as school discipline. The findings in Chapter III support these claims; however, these participants over time became more comfortable addressing race and the interconnected factors that could determine if an African American student received an office discipline referral. The participants in this study each discussed having informal or external school experiences with African American students. Regardless of the participant's race, the informal experiences exposed them to

realities that many African American students face inside and outside of the confines of school. From a Critical Race Theoretical framework, the signature difference with the participants in this study and typical development of assistant principals, is that they incorporated the voices and experiences of African American students as they adapted their disciplinary practices.

The participants, upon transitioning their mindset from managers of classroom behavior to school-wide behavior management, found themselves balancing the needs of the teachers with the wholistic needs of African American students. This approach positioned the participants to identify elements of racism, implicit, and explicit biases that teachers or other school staff exhibited towards African American students. The participants' approach to defining and implementing alternative solutions (i.e., working with social workers and counselors to provide support for a student homeless student, or securing assistance from outside agencies to provide access to affordable afterschool care) harkens to the critical race theory tenet which indicates that measures to confront and eliminate systemic acts of racism must involve a multitude of groups from across different interdisciplinary systems (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This is not to suggest that the participants completely ruled out suspending African American students for violent behaviors, however, their first and or second attempt to prevent behavior is rooted in a sense of advocacy. Gloria Ladson-Billings sternly reminds educators that while identifying the symptoms that oppress students of color is ideal, the true purpose above all other aspects of critical race theory is the staunch need for educators, and in this case assistant principals, to advocate for the rights and needs of students of color (2014).

Chapter IV gives a retrospective examination of the assistant principal position, from the vantage point of principals. A number of findings from this chapter corroborate the themes and findings from Chapter III. First, the participants pinpointed a lack of opportunities in educational leadership programs to authentically learn about the assistant principal role; and while it corresponds with participants' experiences in Chapter III, it also supports the conclusions from a number of studies (Armstrong, 2014, Busch, MacNeil, & Baraniuk, 2010). The absence of courses that directly address the assistant principal position is alarming, yet there is the potential for educational leadership program to bridge this gap by providing meaningful internship experiences.

Additionally, the participants in Chapter IV echoed the sentiments of the participants in Chapter III, that to effectively work with African American students and their families, an educator must intentionally place themselves in positions where they are actively listening. The first couple of years as an assistant principal, these participants engaged in the active use of exclusionary disciplinary practices with little regard for the long-term consequences facing African American students. Realizing that few, if any of the students rectified their behaviors from their disciplinary methods, the participants, with help from their principal and counselors, began investigating central issues contributing to that student's behavior. Additionally, the began to realize that some, if not many of the disciplinary issues were not the fault of the student, but due to teachers' lack of culturally responsive practices in the classroom. Through a Culturally Responsive School Leadership lens, the responsive nature exhibited by the participants exemplifies how education leaders should reflexively adapt to issues in their school (Khadifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016).

School discipline remains a central issue which has stunted the academic growth for a large number of African American students in urban schools; and the continual use of exclusionary practice has been found to be counterproductive. Reforming how students are disciplined, while considering the contextual factors (i.e., cultural mismatch in the classroom, racial or culturally biased school conduct policies, implicit and explicit teacher bias, under-informed guardians) highlights educators' willingness to promote the cognitive, social, and emotional growth of a student, and situates them as culturally responsive school leaders (Gaymon, 2017; Giles, Johnson, Brooks & Jacobson, 2005).

A unique finding in Chapter IV is the readiness of the participants to offer formal and informal methods of support for the assistant principals they supervise. Fully understanding their own shortcomings when they took on the mantle of assistant principal, the participants kept an open-door policy to ensure that if any situation or question arose, their assistant principal would feel comfortable enough to reach out. Moreover, the participants encouraged their assistant principal's professional growth by sending them to school-wide and district-wide professional development seminars. These seminars covered topics such as cultural competency, implicit and explicit biases, and school discipline. Interestingly enough, two of the principals from this study serve as the supervisors for the participants in Chapter III; with these principals transferring their culturally responsive practices to the assistant principals they mentored. Seemingly, the culturally responsive practices being transferred could be a direct result of the principals in Chapter IV having a critical consciousness. The ability to self-reflect, while it took some time for the participants of Chapter IV, was almost a natural ability for the participants in Chapter III. The participants in Chapter III did not openly indicate what

transformative experiences shaped how they changed their disciplinary practices or philosophy; the participants in Chapter IV openly admitted that their interactions with various school stakeholders and students, combined to create a cumulative transformative experience that formed and supported their critical consciousness. Being able to identify the existence of a critical consciousness is traced back to their doctoral program that provided advance courses and experiences dealing with challenges and possibilities in urban education. As educators, there is a reluctance to understand how one reflects, and how developing a critical conscious can have a multiplicative influence not only on one's own development, but the performance and growth of the individual a person supervises. This resonates with the existing literature on the importance of principal's dispositions when establishing non-punitive discipline cultures in a school (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014).

As a collective series, the findings produced from these studies suggest that for African American students in urban schools, reducing discipline disproportionality and crippling the school-to-prison pipeline is heavily contingent on assistant principals' disciplinary philosophy. As the discipline gatekeeper for their individual grade level and school, understanding how to correctly apply discipline sanctions comes at the cost of alienating teachers and possibly African American students. If left to determine the best strategies for working with African American students, assistant principals would seamlessly transition their dispositions as a classroom teacher into this role (Williams, 2012). This aspect is critical, as the factors which altered the participants' dispositions for the benefit of African American students could have easily been missing, depending on the school they worked at. For example, Williams (2012) has well-documented the

tendency for teachers to carry their dispositions and biases into the classroom. This has proven to negatively impact African American students' academic performance, but also increased the number of office discipline referrals for subjective offenses such as defiance, disengagement, disrespect, etc. Williams' findings suggest that these deficit-based beliefs about African American students survive individuals' transition into their leadership role, which can create catastrophic effects on academic and discipline outcomes (2012).

Whether the discipline culture is based on restorative or preventative practices, or punitive authoritarian practices, the finding suggest that assistant principals eventually acculturate to the disciplinary culture of that school. A comforting finding is that principals who are culturally responsive school leaders are paving the way for the assistant principals in their school to become culturally responsive school leaders. While additional literature concerning assistant principal preparation is needed from a theoretical and practitioner's perspective, the noteworthy findings in this study have served to redefined what it means to be a disciplinary gatekeeper; an education leader who is unwavering in their commitment in protecting students' opportunities to learn, while using their legal authority to integrate culturally responsive discipline interventions for historically marginalized students.

Implications and Future Studies

The studies, both combined and individually reveal numerous potential implications on urban schools, teacher preparation programs, educational leadership programs, and school district approaches to eliminating the excessive use of exclusionary disciplinary practices on African American students. First, the stabilization of urban

schools requires recruiting and retaining school administrative teams (i.e., principals, assistant principals, social workers, and counselors), whose singular purpose outside of improving the academic performance of students is to recalibrate the application of discipline. This study unveils the criticality of having school administrative members who work in cohesion to collect and share vital contextual information about African American students and their families. This has served to decrease the number of African American students removed from academic learning environments at Taylor Thomas Middle School, and sustain a relatively low-number and racially proportionate number of suspensions at Dutch Hollow Middle.

Secondly, the existing literature and the findings of this study confirm that when individuals take on the responsibilities of assistant principals, they bring with them the dispositions they developed as a teacher (Williams, 2012). Thus, it is of extreme importance that teacher preparation programs develop and incorporate courses that intentionally address the importance of eliminating deficit-based dispositions towards African American students. While one or a couple of multicultural courses seems sufficient, the findings indicate that these courses are not sufficient enough in dismantling teacher candidates' implicit racial biases, nor do these classes fully contextualize the historical and contemporary factors which have created the current conditions in education for African American students.

Third, a thorough discussion and analysis between educational leadership programs, teacher preparation programs, and school administrators regarding the inclusion of specific courses that align with the daily tasks of assistant principals is necessary. Offering courses on school-wide discipline that build upon assistant principal

candidates' experiences in their teacher preparation program would help to bridge the pedagogical knowledge gap between the classroom, educational leadership courses, and the requirements of the position. By continuing to ignore the practical differences in responsibilities between assistant principals and principals, educational leadership programs are providing a disservice to assistant principal candidates and the future schools they will work in.

Finally, school districts should continue to offer professional development opportunities for assistant principals, but should tailor the content to explicating best practices when working with African American students in urban schools. While examining the data is a solid step in pinpointing discipline disproportionalities, often there is a strong tendency by school district administration to prescribe policy and procedural changes without feedback from assistant principals and principals. A quarterly professional development centering on affirmative school discipline practices and procedures would promote the solicitation of ideas and best practices amongst assistant principals and principals. Furthermore, participants in these professional development opportunities can glean effective models from peer schools with a similar socioeconomic and racial student enrollment as their own.

In regards to the future, substantial gaps in the literature concerning assistant principals will require researchers to investigate this position from both a quantitative and qualitative methodological approach (e.g., interviews, participatory action research, and multivariate analysis, etc.). Since assistant principals encompass multiple roles, researchers must be mindful to intentionally select participants whose primary responsibility is to handle discipline for their school. Ignoring this could fundamentally

skew any studies attempting to illuminate the importance of this position in K-12 education. Also, while this study focused on traditional public urban middle schools exclusively (i.e., primarily because of their prevalence of African American students), a natural extension is to investigate assistant principals in private and charter schools, in addition to elementary and high school. While there may exist similarities between the school types, the responsibilities of individuals who serve in the capacity of assistant principal may differ because of multiple contextual factors (i.e., adolescent development, discipline options, access to mental health and support services, etc.).

Also, it is recommended that subsequent research on assistant principals critically analyze if the race of an assistant principal in relation to the racial composition of the school they serve in, predicts the type and dosage of discipline interventions used for African American students. This can be done through large scale logistic regression analysis, while still controlling for mitigating variables (e.g., poverty, size of student enrollment, location of the school, etc.). These findings should help uncover if cultural or racial mismatches exist at the school administration level, but also it can pave the way forward for the inclusion of culturally responsive school-wide management professional development for all school administrators, regardless of racial or cultural background.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from the collective studies offer multiple pathways towards future research that can directly and indirectly impact African American students, school discipline in urban schools, and the maturation and retention of assistant principals. In regards to African American students and assistant principals, subsequent research must explore the positionality of assistant principals as interpreters of school discipline for

African American students and parents. It is commonplace for assistant principals to support the structure and policies of schools, without providing insightful assistance to African American parents, who may or may not fully understand their legal rights or the procedures to seek additional assistance for their student. This comes down to the type of relationship assistant principals have with the families in their school. A question for future consideration is whether an assistant principals' relationship with an African American students' parent(s) or guardian(s) can determine the quality and type of disciplinary sanction given to the student?

When contemplating on African American students and barriers to their success, it would be egregious to ignore the increased harsh treatment of African American girls for non-violent offenses. A subsequent line of inquiry must diligently investigate if the assistant principal position, over penalizes African American girls for being double minorities based on gender and race. The research design can involve qualitative approaches (i.e., interviews with students and assistant principals, surveys, etc.) or a quantitative design utilizing a logistic regression model to determine if race/gender predicts a student's suspension type after receiving an office discipline referral.

Transitioning from student-to-assistant principal research, recommendations for new research must also consider investigating an assistant principal's influence on teachers' style of classroom management, and explore the willingness of teachers in urban schools to become assistant principals despite the notable challenges. As often the first responder at the administrative level, assistant principals are charged with supporting teachers' who have a history of struggling with managing their classroom. A key nuance by assistant principals is understanding how a teacher is struggling (i.e., lack of

instructional content, deficiency in culturally competency, or the reluctance to structure students' time effectively, etc.), provide the correct and effective supports to prevent teacher burnout, and reduce a teacher's frequent use of an office discipline referral for matters which can be handled in the classroom. This avenue of research should be conducted through multiple observations of an assistant principal who has a proven-record of supporting teachers' growth, and interviews with teachers' who have benefited from the support provided.

In the course of providing recommendations, an aspect to explore is how educators develop their sense of reflection, towards a critical consciousness. What does critical consciousness look like for teacher, and are there differences between the critical consciousness that a teacher must have, versus an assistant principal or principal? Additionally, where does the intersection of practice and theory exist, where experiences and the discourse around these experiences provide transcendental growth around ones' responsibility to advocate for students in urban schools? These are complicated questions; however, one recommendation is to explicitly target the characteristics, dispositions, beliefs, and capabilities of future and current educators to reflect on these items through courses devoted to dismantling race/racism and to promote critical thought. It is not a sufficient enough attempt to provide courses and diverse field experiences for teacher candidates, assistant principal candidates, and principal candidates without explicitly explicating the importance of having an ever-evolving critical consciousness when working with African American students. These courses are to be mandated for educators in universities, open for in-service educators to engage in, and taught by senior

level professors and practitioners whose commitment to urban school environments is evident in the scholarship, practices, and impact they have in the community.

Finally, if school discipline disparities for African American students is to take a significant reduction because of the practices of assistant principals, it is recommended that future research take into consideration how teachers are primed by principals to become assistant principals, and the selection process of principals who are seeking applicants to serve as the disciplinary administrator for their respective school. Extracting the findings from all of the studies, the consistent application of school rules by assistant principals is the culminating result of strong culturally responsive mentorship from principals. However, a greater understanding is required on the characteristics that principals feel will make a teacher an assistant principal that can remain in an urban school and serve as an advocate for African American students and families. While extensive, this research should employ a mixed method approach, cultivating in a widely distributed survey to urban principals, and then proceeding to follow-up with principals through focus groups based on emergent findings from the survey.

The list of recommendations for future research is not exhaustive, but rather each offer strategic next steps for assessing and conceptualizing a student-centered framework for assistant principals' involvement in disciplinary matters. This framework is contingent on research synthesizing multiple data points about the position. Yet, the discourse from these studies can serve to redesign educational leadership policies and coursework for assistant principals as a position separate from principals, as well as inform current assistant principals of best practices concerning their position and school discipline for African American students.

Recommendations for Assistant Principals Working with African American Students

The overarching and respective findings from each study offers individuals who serve in the capacity of assistant principal with recommendations for how they can best support the African American students they interact with on a daily basis. First, assistant principals must regularly examine and address systemic biases that exist in school discipline policies, procedures, personnel, and practices. This can be achieved by talking with their colleagues at their respective school about measures to improve their discipline data. This discussion must include African American students as well, through a robust open forum where students are allowed to voice their feelings without retribution. While there is a societal stance to question and denigrate African American students and their backgrounds based on historical racist overtures, it is important that assistant principals centralize African American students' voice in any school discipline reform effort. As discussed in the study, one of the assistant principals constantly reviewed data to make informed decisions to prevent and reduce the use of suspensions for African American students. Additionally, another manner to assist African American students through data analysis, is through policy reform. One of the biggest issues with school discipline is that educators are unaware of how simple policies such as dress code, or rules for tardiness, can disproportionately impact African American student in urban schools. Assistant principals can leverage their power and resources to realign seemingly color-blind policies and practices, into apparatuses that work to the benefit of all students. Policy alignment can be done by submitting policies to a third-party board (comprised of

students, select staff, and community stakeholders) who are designated to validate the policy and the potential implications from its enforcement.

Second, assistant principals should utilize positive youth development as the first measure of interaction with African American students and their families. The first contact that an assistant principal has with a student should not be negative, nor should the first call to his or her parents. Forming relationships through positive interactions establishes a tone which is not predicated on the power dynamic of an assistant principal controlling the behaviors of a student. Rather these types of interactions seek to cultivate meaningful support for the students' academic growth. Sending a simple email, or leaving a voicemail regarding a students' positive behavior, goes a long way with African American students and their families. This action(s) makes it less challenging when the time comes to reprimand the student for misbehavior, as parents and the student recognize that the redirection is not direct at them, but rather towards the misbehavior. Assistant principals should be present at meetings and open houses at the beginning of the year; but additionally, they should host monthly meetings which involve students, families, and community members. These actions allow assistant principals to be proactively involved with students, families, and community members so as to address any school concerns or to positively promote the progress that some or are students are making in the school.

Third, African American students are more complex than they appear, however, often they just want their voice to be heard. Assistant principals would do well to provide African American students with resources and outlets to allow themselves to be heard. Something as simple as listening to a student discuss their home life, or break down what

current music they listen to helps to establish relationships, which can be called upon to redirect misbehavior instead of the use of exclusionary discipline interventions. Instead of waiting for certain students to misbehave because of their track record, be proactive. Identify students who could use the extra support and encouragement and place them in clubs or classes that will nurture their academic and social growth. Furthermore, if the need for redirection is warranted, assistant principals are recommended to pull African American students aside to address the issue. Ideally, it lets African American students know that the intention of the conversation is not to embarrass them, but to solicit their assistance in maintaining structure and order through their compliance with school rules.

Finally, the application of the aforementioned recommendations focuses on external practices that assistant principals can employ, yet, the most important recommendation is for assistant principal to critically reflect on their own biases, stereotypes, and school discipline practices towards African American students. As indicated by the participants, the realization of African American students as deserving, academically engaged participants in education stems from having interactions with them in non-formative situations. It is recommended that assistant principals, both novice and veteran, spend a considerable amount of time interacting with African American students outside the confines of the school. Non-consequential environments (i.e., attending church, coaching, etc.) provided the participants in the study with capability to familiarize themselves with aspects of African American culture, which defied their own predispositions and allowed them separate cultural differences from actual aspects of student misbehavior.

Without disrupting persistent notions to rely on antiquated, deficit ideologies towards African American students and their culture, assistant principals can only serve to act as forces of opposition for African American students. This severely restricts assistant principals' capability to cultivate relationships with African American students, identify and address individual oppressive behaviors by teachers and other school personnel against African American students, and foster a school-wide culture that stresses the need for preventative school discipline practices and restorative interventions.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, one significant barrier against African Americans and their pursuit of an equitable education in the U.S. is the systemic overuse of exclusionary and disparaging disciplinary practices. As a defining social justice issue in society, there is not one singular method to restricting the unnecessary referral of African American students to school administrators for misbehavior or the perceived threat of noncompliance. A defining valve which can ebb these ever-rising disparities against African Americans students are assistant principals. They have the legal authority and power to interrogate school discipline policies, school-wide practices, and teachers' classroom management capabilities when it appears as if the crippling influence of racism seeks to adjudicate African American students without sufficient evidence. While true reform for school discipline practices and policies will require time, African American students cannot wait for the hearts and minds of individuals to change. For what is at stake is the educational and socioeconomic foundation that is required to access one's dreams and goals in life. The assistant principal is not just a mere disciplinarian. They are

a disciplinary gatekeeper whose position and authority can impact African Americans students for generations to come – hopefully for the better.

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