

5-31-2022

# Must Be Present to Win: Principals' Perspectives on Exclusionary Discipline

William Jeremy Cohen  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open\\_access\\_etds](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds)



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

## Recommended Citation

Cohen, William Jeremy, "Must Be Present to Win: Principals' Perspectives on Exclusionary Discipline" (2022). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 6024.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7895>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

Must Be Present To Win:

Principals' Perspectives on Exclusionary Discipline

by

William Jeremy Cohen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership: Administration

Dissertation Committee:  
Pat Burk, Chair  
Dot McElhone  
Deborah Peterson  
Yves Labissiere

Portland State University  
2022

© 2022 William Jeremy Cohen

## **Abstract**

One of the persistent challenges in United States elementary schools is the ongoing use of exclusionary discipline practices. In Oregon, despite the application of a number of legal and policy shifts intended to reduce the use of suspension and expulsion in K-5 and K-8 schools, particularly for students of color, there continues to be an increase year-to-year of the number of students being excluded, the percentage of students excluded, and an increasingly disproportionate use of exclusion for students of color. Although the research shows that removing students from the learning environment does not improve student behavior nor improve overall school discipline and has a negative impact on academic achievement, the practice persists. This study sought to better understand the factors leading to the decisions of administrators during the disciplinary process that can lead to exclusionary discipline outcomes. Using a sequential, two-step qualitative approach, principals shared their perspectives in focus groups and individual interviews revealing the various pressures, from both within the school community and from outside, that they face when making discipline decisions. The results showed how multifaceted school discipline is and that a change in any one aspect of the discipline process is unlikely to produce a change in practices.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my wife and educational partner Rebecca, who shows up for kids no matter what, fights for their right to be loved and included in every school and shares my moral outrage when adults give up, and for the past 19 years you have patiently supported me finishing a doctoral degree; thank you for your persistence, your love and passion for what we do. To my kids, Jori and Pearl, thank you for understanding why I was always working late into the night, and I hope to be a reminder that you can have whatever you want if you keep at it. To Howard and Sharon, thank you for continuing to welcome me into your lives, and finally to my mom, who would have loved to see this day finally arrive.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my committee members who have been generous in sharing their time and expertise. Thank you Dr. McElhone, Dr. Peterson, and Dr. Labissiere for agreeing to be a part of my committee.

I wish to offer a special thanks to Dr. Pat Burk, for serving as my committee chair, guide, sounding board and mentor in both this project and the daily work of serving in schools. The hours spent reading and rereading my drafts, discussing my thinking and prodding me along is why I am here today. Your support for me as a scholar and practitioner inspires me to be better in every way.

Finally, I would like to thank the other members of my cohort, Dr. Kevin Walker, Dr. Lorna Fast Buffalo Horse, Dr. Ryan Carpenter, Sheryl Lipski, Jorge Meza, and Efrain Rivas. Your humor and brilliance made the difference on many days when it felt like too much, and I am honored to have sat alongside you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Tables.....	vi
List of Figures.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Research Problem.....	9
Significance of the Problem.....	9
Presentation of Methods and Research Questions.....	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	17
Behaviorism.....	18
Critical Race Theory.....	23
Loose Coupling Theory.....	28
Complexity Theory.....	33
Review of Research Literature.....	37
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	44
Methodology.....	45
Participants.....	49
Procedures.....	51
Chapter 4: Findings.....	60
Behaviorism.....	62
Loosely Coupled/Tightly Coupled Organizations.....	72
Critical Race Theory.....	82
Complexity Theory.....	88
Overview of Findings.....	98
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications.....	104
Synthesis of Findings.....	108
Situated in the Larger Context.....	113
Limitations.....	114

Implications.....	116
Conclusion.....	120
References.....	122
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter to Participants.....	133
Appendix B: Consent to Participate in Research.....	135
Appendix C: Focus Group Question Guide.....	138
Appendix D: Individual Interview Question Guide.....	141
Appendix E : 1st Phase Framework Coding.....	142
Appendix F: 2nd Phase Coding, Matrix Compilations.....	153



## List of Tables

Table	Page
1 Reinforcement and punishment comparison.....	19

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
1 Exclusionary Discipline Rates Compared to Enrollment by Race.....	13
2 Procedures.....	51
3 Framework Matrix with Sample Codes.....	54
4 Second Phase Coding Matrix.....	55
5 Data Analysis Process.....	57

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

For around 180 days each year the morning is welcomed by millions of school aged students getting ready for another day in the American education system. There are yellow school buses rolling through neighborhoods in every state; there are lunches packed by parents, guardians, grandparents and students themselves; and there are teachers and school staff loading up on coffee and breakfast to ready the classrooms. For most students in this country, the new day brings the promise of new information, new skills, and new experiences and brings them one step closer to fulfilling the promise of compulsory education, that they will emerge from the K-12 system college and career ready. For some students, however, the day begins without the hope of another day of school, and for others, the day begins with the very real concern that they will not make it to the end of the school day. The aim of this research project is to better understand the factors leading to the decisions of administrators during the disciplinary process that can potentially lead to exclusionary discipline outcomes.

### **Background of the Problem**

As recently as 2015 there were over 53 million school aged children in the United States (Digest of Education Statistics, 2016). Of those, there are over 35 million students in the PK-8 grades, spread out over all states, cities and towns in both public and private institutions. Organized into classrooms and grades, schools and districts with a patchwork of laws, policies and practices that govern all aspects of their education: from learning standards to instructional minutes and from number of days of attendance to

codes of conduct. At the classroom level, there are over 3 million teachers, each tasked with implementing instruction, maintaining a learning environment, building relationships, and participating in the culture of the school and district. And in many of those classrooms, there are students that present difficult and complex behaviors, behaviors that have the ability to disrupt the instruction and even put the safety of students and staff at risk. In response to various behavior concerns, students are sent out of class--sometimes for a break, sometimes for a longer period and sometimes they are asked to leave school for the day, the week or longer.

It has been well documented that there is a positive relationship between consistent student attendance and a variety of academic indicators of success (Gottfried, 2010). When students are asked to leave class, or are suspended from school for any amount of time, there is a clear educational impact, and this impact is frequently felt by the most vulnerable students. In recent years there has been an increased focus on the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline that create the first step in a trajectory that too often leads to what has been termed the “School to Prison Pipeline” that serves to “push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually the criminal, justice system, where prison is the end of the road” (Fund, 2006, Overview, paragraph 2).

Exclusionary disciplinary practices fall disproportionately on students of color, specifically on boys, and the impact is even more concerning for African-American males. Barbara Townsend found that African-American boys were suspended at a rate three times their representation in the general school population (Townsend, 2000), while

more recent research shows the problem is getting worse (Losen, 2013; Skiba, et. al, 2011; Williams, 2017). While the causes of disproportionality are varied and complex, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2000), argue that persistent bias is a leading factor. They note disproportionality occurs in two places in the process. The first is the over-representation of African-American males for office referrals. This is the teacher-initiated process that sends a student to the office for misbehavior (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2000). Skiba et al. (2011) also found that African-American boys were more likely to be sent to the office (office referral) than other groups for similar offenses. They note, “black students were more likely than white students to be referred to the office for disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering behaviors that are at once less serious and more subjective in their interpretation” (p.28).

The second location of disproportionality in the discipline process is with the result of the office referral, what is frequently called the “disposition” or “outcome.” While the disproportionality present in the referrals themselves would create the conditions for disproportionality in dispositions, there is further evidence that there is an additional disproportionality in the assignment of the disposition itself (Skiba, et. al, 2014). This is to say that African-American males are sent to the office for discipline at a rate considerably higher than their population representation, and they are given more severe dispositions for their offenses when compared to their white peers, even when committing the same violation. This double disproportionality is the underlying structure for the school to prison pipeline.

Whenever there are groups of people together in a shared space, there is the establishment of shared rules and expectations. In some situations, those rules are socially constructed and maintained through social acceptance. Whispering in a library, sharing seats on public transportation, and waiting your turn in a line are situations where there are loosely defined rules and even more loosely defined consequences for violating them. On the other end of the spectrum, secure spaces like an airport have highly managed rules with clearly posted and enforced consequences for violations. Somewhere between, the classrooms of American schools have a patchwork of clearly defined rules and unspoken codes that result in both inconsistent consequences and inconsistent responses from the institution. The rules and expectations that govern behavior in schools combined with the consequences for violations of those rules and expectations are discipline practices. Brown, Skiba, and Eckes (2010) describe discipline policies as having two main purposes: a) ensuring the safety of those within the school, and b) creating an “environment conducive to learning” (p. 1074). Administrators may also be attempting to c) “reduce rates of future misbehavior” and d) “[teach] students needed skills for successful interaction in school and society (p. 1074). In addition to policies at the school level, there are laws and rules from the federal, state, and local governments.

At the national level, there are very few rules regarding discipline, however, their impact is dramatic. In 1994, as a result of the perception that schools had lost control of student conduct, congress passed the Gun Free Schools Act (Mongan and Walker, 2012). Led by Senator Diane Feinstein, the GFSA was designed to bring consistency to school policies that had been varied in their approach to dangerous weapons in schools. The act

imposed a “zero-tolerance” policy on all schools that received federal funds with regards to weapons on campus. According to Mongan and Walker, however, the zero-tolerance policies have not achieved their desired goals. In fact, they note “zero-tolerance weapons policies that were conceived out of the passage of the Gun Free School Act of 1994 have not been empirically supported, are theoretically unsound, and fail to meet standardized criteria for punishment policy according to the Model Penal Code” (p. 239). Because they do not offer clear enough discretion for circumstances and seek to punish and exclude instead of supporting and helping students who bring dangerous weapons to schools, these policies have the impact of removing students from schools for prolonged periods of time. The standard consequence for a violation of the Gun Free Schools Act is to “expel from school for a period of not less than 1 year a student who is determined to have brought a firearm to a school, or to have possessed a firearm at a school” (Gun Free Schools Act, 1994). To mitigate the finality of the expulsion, there are provisions in the act that allow school districts to provide education at an alternative setting, and there is a statement about administrators having the discretionary power to reduce the penalty.

In addition to federal laws and policies that specifically create discipline practices, all discipline practices are subject to the application of the U. S. Constitution’s provisions under the 14th Amendment for Due Process. There are two parts to the Amendment, “under the procedural component of the Due Process Clause, the state must provide fair procedures when a person is deprived of life, liberty, or property. The substantive component requires that the state’s actions not be arbitrary or unreasonable” (*DUE PROCESS OF LAW*, n.d.). While there is little consistency from state to state, and even

less at the local school district level, the 14th Amendment provides an opportunity to apply a legal check on the discipline processes, where the school acts as the “state” to potentially deprive the student of their right to an education, which is considered an extension of their property. In a 2007 study, Fenning and Rose noted that “Despite the important role of written policies, such as discipline codes of conduct mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), there has been relatively limited formal study of these documents” (p. 547). They go on to note that there are very few specific interventions noted for behaviors beyond the allowability of suspension and expulsion.

In Oregon, specifically, the recent passage of Senate Bill 553 (2015) codifies into state law the requirement that schools consider the age and past behavior of students in the 5th grade and lower before using suspension or expulsion. The bill further specifies the original language of ORS 339.250, offering a narrower range of behaviors that qualify as suspension eligible offenses. At the present moment, there are a set of federal laws, state laws, and local school board policies that districts leverage to reduce the number of young students who experience exclusionary discipline. However, despite the strong research base showing the ineffectiveness of exclusionary discipline (Losen, 2013; Welsh & Little, 2018) as well as the various policy levers used to reduce the total number of exclusionary outcomes, the problem persists.

As noted earlier, there are two steps in the discipline process that result in exclusionary discipline. The first is the origination of the discipline referral, controlled largely by the teacher. This step is at times formal, using office referral forms and at other times sending a student to the office or calling the administration on the phone for



“help” with a student. The teacher actions, however, are outside the scope of this study directly. However the teacher action creates the conditions upon which the second part relies. The second part of the discipline process that results in exclusionary outcomes, is based on decisions by the administrator. Skiba, et al. (2014) remind us that in schools with administrators aligned philosophically against exclusionary discipline, the number of students experiencing exclusion is lower.

Although every student is impacted by discipline policies, there are specific groups of students that experience disciplinary consequences more harshly and more frequently than other groups. When talking about exclusionary discipline, which is to say disciplinary practices that remove students from classes for a short time through the rest of the year, there is a consistent and predictable disproportionate representation by race. According to the Civil Rights Project, “one out of every six enrolled Black students was suspended, compared with one in twenty White students” (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p.6). Similar trends occur for students that identify as Latino, Pacific Islander, or Native American. Compared with their white peers, students of color are removed from school at a much higher rate. Additionally, students served through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) through special education have greater legal protection, but also are excluded at a much higher rate than their non-special education peers. In a national study of state level data, Losen and Gillespie (2012) found that students served through special education services were 2-4 times more likely to be suspended than their non-special education peers. This disparity is despite the additional legal protections afforded students receiving special education services. For students of color being served through

special education services, discipline disparity is even worse. As Losen and Gillespie found, Black students with IEPs were greatly over-represented in the exclusionary data, with “one out of every four Black K-12 students with disabilities was suspended out of school at least one time in 2009-2010” (2012, p.14).

To further complicate matters, one of the most pervasive arguments for exclusionary discipline practice is that disruptive and out of control students negatively impact the learning of the other students. Losen and Gillespie (2012) argue

Equally important is that researchers find that the frequent use of suspension brings no benefits in terms of test scores or graduation rates for non-disciplined peers. Thus, the oft-repeated claim that it is necessary to kick out the bad kids so the good kids can learn is shown to be a myth ( p.4).

Another common argument in favor of exclusionary discipline is that sending kids home will teach them a lesson. This argument is rooted in the logic that suspended students would avoid being suspended again. Brown et al. (2009) addressed the concept of suspensions and expulsions as a deterrent to misbehavior in schools, but they concluded that “Studies of suspension have consistently found relatively high rates of repeat offending among those who are suspended, suggesting a clear lack of deterrence for those students. (p. 1077)

From the research, it is clear that excluding students from school is not good for the students who are excluded; it is not good for the rest of the students or the school and because it results in missed educational opportunities, it is not good for society as a whole. However, the practice persists, and it is increasingly clear that there are serious

racialized contexts and consequences that disproportionately impact specific subgroups of students.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

This study examines the decisions used by practicing administrators in urban K-8 schools that can result in the use of exclusionary discipline. There is a narrow set of student behaviors that necessitate a mandatory exclusion, and there is increased awareness that student race and disability are predictable factors in the use of exclusionary discipline, yet the practice of exclusionary discipline persists. There have been a number of policy approaches to reducing the overall number of exclusionary discipline outcomes, as well as a specific focus on reducing disproportionality in those outcomes. However, the overall problem remains, as does the inequity by race. While there have been numerous studies to describe the outcomes, there are to date very few that have asked what is behind the decision-making process that results in individual students being removed.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Over the past three academic years for which we have reporting in the state of Oregon (2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18) there has been an increase from 14,000 to 21,000 suspensions, which also represents a growing percentage of total students suspended from 5.61% to 6.01%. While there have been attempts to reduce these incidents through recent state law and local school district policies, the evidence shows increases in suspensions for all groups, including those groups for which there has been historic disproportionality (Oregon Department of Education, 2019.) For each

suspension there is an increased likelihood of leaving school early and an increase in risk for incarceration, which has ongoing implications for future financial status.

### **Presentation of Methods and Research Questions**

I used a multi-method approach that includes focus groups of school administrators currently working in an urban K-5 or K-8 context, and then individual interviews to get more specific and individualized responses to concepts and ideas that emerged from the focus groups. The primary question this study seeks to answer is: How do administrators of elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest describe their rationale for using exclusionary discipline? Additionally, there are secondary questions: what are the factors that are used to decide when to use exclusionary discipline? What are the factors used to decide to avoid using exclusionary discipline?

The use of focus groups is designed to elicit the discussion-based synergy only possible when there is an ongoing, dynamic conversation among similarly situated participants (Morgan, 2019). This study examines the individual responses to the questions about when exclusionary discipline is used, and also the ways that other participants assent, dissent and build on previously stated concepts with individual comments and ideas. Because the participants share the positionality of disciplinary decision makers, they have experienced similar sets of conditions through which they must make exclusionary decisions. In addition to the advantage of participant synergy, another advantage of the focus group is that it is also possible to see comparative disagreement among members as they respond to one another's responses. By starting with focus groups, I was able to get a strong sense of the various factors administrators

consider that result in exclusionary discipline and how pervasive that specific factor is among the other participants. I sequentially used follow up interviews to both verify the reactions I observed as well as get deeper contextual information that helped inform my results. The initial questions that guided my work were based on an existing survey that was given to sitting elementary school administrators in an Indiana study to understand their general alignment with respect to discipline and exclusionary practices (Skiba, 2004).

One of the central concepts at the heart of this study is what is referred to as exclusionary discipline. For this work, it refers to disciplinary actions imposed by school administrators that remove students from classroom instruction or school. This definition includes in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion (Burke & Nishioka, 2014). Exclusionary discipline is most often used with the hope to create or maintain safe and orderly schools by removing, temporarily or permanently, students who pose a threat to the safety or orderliness of the classroom or school environment. Although very common throughout the K-12 system, there is “no evidence that imposing exclusionary discipline on more students has increased school safety, improved learning climates in schools, or improved the behavior of students receiving such discipline” (Burke & Nishioka, 2014, p.i). This definition is the most commonly used, in large part because the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights collects state level data on out of school suspensions and expulsions, but not on other types of disciplinary actions taken by schools (Digest, 2016). When considering the wide range of behaviors for which students are disciplined, the availability of suspension and expulsion

data no doubt drives the research projects. Practices like sending students to the office, to the hallway, to a buddy classroom or to another location in the school are common in schools and certainly remove students from instruction, but they are not easily quantified because they are not often recorded or reported.

Suspension and expulsion are the two primary types of exclusionary discipline utilized in K-12 schools. Suspension is a term used to describe the temporary removal of a student from the classroom for disciplinary reasons. Suspension can include in-school, in which a student is isolated from their peers for a portion of the day or an entire day, or out-of-school, where the student is barred from the school and its grounds for a period of time. This typically includes dis-allowing participation in extracurricular activities including sports, arts, music and community events as a participant or observer.

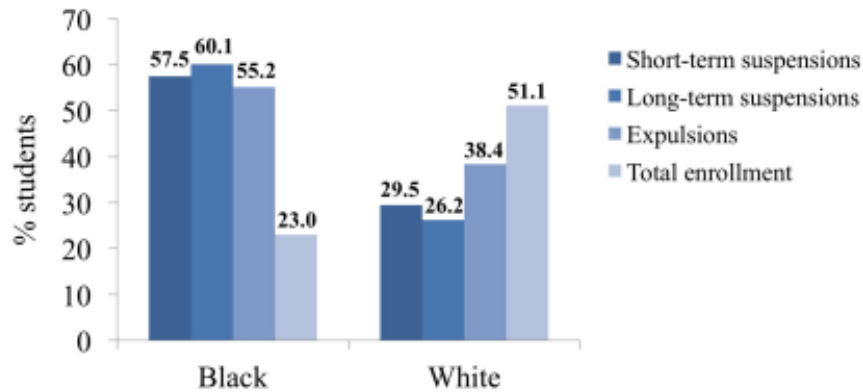
According to the White House Report on school discipline, there were “2.8 million students who received out-of-school suspensions in school year 2013-14, [which] represented approximately 6 percent of all students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools”(2016, p. 2). Specifically in Oregon, as of 2015 the legislature attempted to reduce the number of students suspended by limiting exclusionary discipline to cases where students under 5th grade cause “nonaccidental conduct causing serious physical harm to a student or school employee” (ORS 339, 2015), in situations where there is imminent harm to staff or students or when suspension is required by an existing law (i.e. Gun Free Schools Act). Suspension is further defined by Oregon statute as lasting no longer than 10 days, where expulsion refers to the removal of a student from the educational environment for “not longer than one school year.”(ORS 339, 2015) The

statutory definition also applies to violations of the federal Gun Free Schools Act mandatory penalties of exclusions of up to 365 days.

When thinking about exclusion and discipline, disproportionality is one of the more concerning outcomes. This concept, which has been applied to a number of school-based factors, describes the relationship between a sub-group's representation and the representation of a specific indicator. When looking at discipline, for example, disproportionality exists when the percentage of discipline referrals given to African-American students exceeds the percentage of African-American students relative to the student body. In Figure 1, the left-most bars represent the percentage of students with a short-term suspension by race in Virginia during 2014-15. Black students, for instance, make up 57.5% of the students who were suspended for a short time. Disproportionality occurs when comparing that to the right-most bars, which show that only 23% of the students in Virginia are Black. In this case, disproportionality appears as overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary outcomes, while white students, who make up 51% of the students in Virginia are only 29.5% of the students suspended for a short time. White students then are "underrepresented" in the exclusionary data.

**Figure 1**

**Exclusionary Discipline Rates compared to Enrollment by Race.**



Note. Tefera, et al, (2017)

Disproportionality is also used to describe the over and under identification of students from particular groups for Special Education, Talented and Gifted, enrollment, discipline, academic achievement, as well as many other factors that warrant comparison with the dominant group. Skiba, Horner et al. (2011) note that “For over 25 years, in national-, state-, district-, and building-level data, students of color have been found to be suspended at rates two to three times that of other students, and similarly overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion”(p.86). This metric is often used at the national, state, district and school level to understand ways in which bias impacts students. The US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights collects data from the states on school indicators and publishes the results disaggregated by race, gender, language ability and Special Education identification. For the purposes of this study, when data is reported as a pure percentage of students or infractions, I will use the overall percentage of that population in order to calculate disproportionality consistently.



Perhaps what is most concerning about the reality of disproportionality is the long-term impact discipline practice has on individuals and identifiable groups within our society. The systemic linkage of schools and the justice system is referred to as the “School to Prison Pipeline.” This phrase refers to the relationship between students who are excluded from schools, or pushed out, through suspensions and expulsions, and their eventual involvement with the juvenile justice system. The term itself first appeared as the subject of a conference at Northeastern University on May 16, 2003. Shortly after the conference papers were published, the metaphor of the pipeline was adopted by social justice organizations including the ACLU (McGrew, 2016) According to the ACLU hearing on the School to Prison Pipeline, it is a function of increased use of zero tolerance policies, suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement that prevent students from academic pathways and instead funnel them into criminal justice ones (Fund, 2006, ). The concept of School to Prison Pipeline also includes the use of police personnel in school settings, which includes School Resource Officers, as well as increased use of police officers in school discipline (Petteruti, 2011).

Underlying the overall problem of exclusionary discipline is a historical reliance on removal of students for various behaviors. The thinking was simplistic in that students that are removed (kicked out) no longer pose problems for the rest of the student body. This was made more direct with the introduction of zero-tolerance policies, which are rigid rules governing the response to specific types of behavior at school. Originally imposed by the Gun Free Schools Act (1994) which mandated as a condition for receiving federal funding that all states would have a “law requiring local educational

agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than 1 year a student who is determined to have brought a firearm to a school, or to have possessed a firearm at a school” (1994, Section 4141, B. 1). This law had the effect of imposing a zero-tolerance policy on nearly all schools nationwide. According to Mongan and Walker (2012), “lack of appropriate use of discretionary power is a principal weakness of the zero-tolerance weapons policies.”(p. 233). As could be expected, there were school districts that took the zero-tolerance policy about guns to include other weapons and as a result there is anecdotal evidence that students have been excluded from school for bringing toy guns, kitchen knives for cutting birthday cakes, pocket knives accidentally left in backpacks, and various other infractions outside the original intent of the Gun Free Schools Act. As a result, some school districts have modified their discipline policies to delineate “firearm” from other weapons in order to give additional discretion to administrators for instances where items are brought from home that do not rise to the level requiring a year-long expulsion.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

As discussed in the previous chapter, in US schools, administrators continue to use exclusionary discipline practices despite the clear evidence that these practices do not increase the likelihood of appropriate behaviors for those excluded or their non-excluded peers. There is clear evidence that missing school for any reason, including disciplinary reasons, decreases achievement and increases the risk of dropping out of school before graduating high school. Importantly, exclusionary discipline is also disproportionately applied to students of color and students with a disability regardless of the behavior for which they are being disciplined.

This literature review examines the ongoing research base in disciplinary practices, exclusionary discipline practices, racial disproportionality, and the ways in which these each manifest themselves in student experiences and outcomes. Additionally, I include the history and research regarding various policies applied to this problem, as well as solutions that have thus far been used. Finally, this review will explore the research into the decision-making process employed by administrators when considering exclusionary discipline, which is the focus of this study.

To understand the complexity of phenomena such as exclusionary discipline practices, it is essential to know some of the theoretical understanding of the ways that student behavior, adult behavior, and systems to manage each exist in modern schooling. For this research project, I looked at the interaction of behaviorism, critical

race theory, loose coupling theory and complexity theory with administrator actions and decision making in an elementary school context.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Behaviorism***

One of basic tenets of modern schooling is that students must abide by a set of behavioral expectations in order to create the conditions for their learning and the learning of their peers (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Welsh & Little, 2018; Zhou & Brown, 2015). Behaviorism and its updated versions remain at the center of managing students in order for schooling to take place. Throughout the US there are many specific forms and programs including Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (SWPBIS), Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), and others, it is common for schools to have expected behavioral norms, teach them, and then have a system to ensure students follow the expected behaviors (Bohanon & Wu, 2014; Carr, 2003; Kervick et al., 2019; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Behaviorism is a learning theory that focuses on how individuals respond to stimuli. In this learning theory, observation of behavior is the primary research tool, and thus the focus is on observable phenomena. Learning is defined as behavior that changes as a result of an intervention (Zhou & Brown, 2015). In educational settings, this often looks like creating systems of rewards and punishments in order to manage desired and undesired behaviors in the classroom. Although this theory is based on the original work by B.F. Skinner and John Watson, behaviorist approaches to educational settings have

been adapted and modified in order to facilitate learning for groups of students and individuals.

In classic behaviorism, desired behaviors are rewarded, while undesirable or inappropriate behaviors are punished. What often complicates the uses of behaviorist theories is confusion about the terms as they are used in behaviorism and how they are used in general speech. In behaviorism, there are both positive and negative actions for both reinforcement and punishment. As shown in Table 1, positive reinforcement and punishment are created by the addition of something to modify the behavior. Positive reinforcement may include external rewards, such as the giving of a sticker or token for appropriate behaviors, but can also simply include kind words or positive attention. Likewise, positive punishment would be “giving” detention for inappropriate language. Negative reinforcement and punishment result from taking away something to modify the behaviors. Negative reinforcement would include removing clutter on a student desk to increase engagement, while negative punishment would include taking away recess for talking out in class.(Zhou & Brown, 2015).

**Table 1**

**Reinforcement and punishment comparison**

	REINFORCEMENT (Behavior Increases)	PUNISHMENT (Behavior Decreases)
POSITIVE (Something is added)	Positive Reinforcement Something is added to increase desired behavior Ex: Smile and compliment	Positive Punishment Something is added to decrease undesired behavior Ex: Give student detention

	student on good performance	for failing to follow the class rules
NEGATIVE (Something is removed)	Negative Reinforcement Something is removed to increase desired behavior Ex: Give a free homework pass for turning in all assignments	Negative Punishment Something is removed to decrease undesired behavior Ex: Make student miss their time in recess for not following the class rules

Note. From (Zhou & Brown, 2015)

In many schools today, positive reinforcers for appropriate behaviors are used to manage student behaviors. Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is an operationalized expression of behaviorism in many school systems. These systems include, but are not limited to clear, stated, and taught expectations which are then positively reinforced through school-wide and classroom-based systems (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The use of a school wide system then provides some measure of consistency in response to misbehavior, which typically includes an escalating level of both support and consequences for students. And without clear expectations that are taught and reinforced, students are at much greater risk of experiencing disciplinary consequences.

One of the limitations of the behaviorist approach is that complex behaviors are often difficult to extinguish, a term used to describe the act of reducing and eliminating problem behaviors, because behaviorism relies on observable responses to stimulus. When the underlying causes of the behaviors are difficult to identify it is

similarly difficult to address multiple stimuli at the same time. In order to shape behaviors in students that do not adhere to expectations, there is a reliance on “functional behavioral assessments” which seek to understand the function of the problem behavior in order to allow the student to achieve the same function with a different action--what is referred to as a “replacement” behavior, hopefully one that is more appropriate. However, while the behaviorist approach is often effective, it is rarely quick, and teachers who are experiencing escalating, violent behaviors are often unwilling to wait (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Another limitation of the behaviorist approach in a school context is that the function of a behavior may be difficult to ascertain because students are frequently reinforced for behaviors without the direct intention and planning of the adults attempting to manage the behaviors. For this study, it is important to understand that sending a student to the hallway or suspending them is possibly reinforcing the behavior for the student. If the student does not want to be in class, is avoiding work, or otherwise would rather be somewhere else, removing them from class as a “punishment” isn’t a punishment; it is a reinforcement. This relatively common situation is at the center of frustration with behavior planning in a school context as opposed to a controlled study where only one variable is manipulated.

Most important for this study is the behavior of the adults who initiate the disciplinary process (usually teachers), and those that must make the decision when to use exclusionary practices (usually administrators). Using the same functional behavior approach many schools apply to student behavior, schools must consider the ways that teachers are reinforced through exclusionary discipline. The removal of “problem”

students is negative, because it is based on something being taken away, and it is reinforcing because it is more likely to increase the behavior (in this case excluding a student). For teachers, sending students out of class to the office works for them (reinforced) because the disruption is no longer present and the teacher is rewarded with a more controlled teaching environment. From the behaviorist perspective, the best solutions to exclusionary practices at the classroom level are to either incentivize keeping students in class (positive reinforcement) or assign consequences to the teacher for sending them out (negative punishment). A school that allows teachers to send students who are misbehaving, according to the frequently unclear notion of what “misbehavior” is, to the office and then sends those students home rewards exclusionary discipline. Similarly for administrators, sending students home (suspension) or removing them for the remainder of the year (expulsion) is also negative reinforcement. When students who cause disruption of the academic and social environment are removed from school, they no longer draw on the constrained time and supervision resources available to any individual administrator. As shown above for teachers, from a behaviorist perspective, to reduce exclusionary discipline actions would require suspension to become a larger drain on the time and supervision resources (removing the reinforcer) or there would need to be a more severe consequence for the administrator. Because the research on student discipline focuses on how schools reinforce and punish student behaviors (Burke, A., & Nishioka, V., 2014; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2002; Welsh & Little, 2018), this study will explore how administrators understand the ways behaviorist thinking impacts their decision making about discipline.



### *Critical Race Theory*

One of the most troubling aspects of the data on discipline practices is the ongoing, and worsening disparity in the use of exclusion for students of color. Despite a concerted focus on mitigating racialized outcomes, males of color continue to be overrepresented in the data about exclusionary practices (Brown, et al., 2010; Burke, A., & Nishioka, V., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Williams, 2016). In their foundational essay on Critical Race Theory, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that race is a significant factor in inequity in the United States. Their essay goes on to demonstrate the ways that race and racism, when linked with the ways the United States cultural experience are based on property ownership, result in a power dynamic that disadvantages communities of color. Specifically, the dominant narrative that prioritizes whiteness, white stories, and white accomplishment leave out the significant achievement of people of color and thus re-impose oppressive structures in the present day (Delgado, 2012; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In an essay on teacher preparation, Sleeter (2016) identifies that “a core premise of Critical Race Theory is that racism is endemic, institutional, and systematic; racism is not an aberration but rather a fundamental way of organizing society”(p. 157). Using some of the primary tenets of Critical Race Theory, it becomes clear how race affects the ability of the organization to respond to racially divergent outcomes. Where proponents of Critical Race Theory see racism as endemic, and thus an essential part of the organizational structures of schooling, there exists an alternate concept: “Multicultural Education.” Multicultural Education is the diversification of curriculum, but it ultimately strives to serve the dominant culture by asserting that

everyone has a culture (which is ancillary to no one has a culture). There is a substantial difference between the incremental change offered by multicultural education and the radical reorganization called for in Critical Race Theory. Critical Race theory, conversely, puts race at the center of the conversation in order to assert its importance.

As it relates to suspensions and expulsions, and how the organization of schools and school systems contribute to disparity for students of color, Critical Race Theory provides a framework to see how bias functions across individual classrooms, as well as within overall systems in a school. Critical Race Theory asks us to see various practices by individuals and policies, which are often thought to be neutral, as inherently racially biased. Delgado (2012) asserts that Critical Race Theory reveals that objectivity and neutrality are “camouflages for the self-interest of dominant groups in American society” (p. A7), further imposing the existing power dynamic on communities of color. When policies and rules are considered “objective,” it is the student who is always at fault for transgression. However, proponents of Critical Race Theory ask us to question the objectivity of the policies and rules that were almost universally created within the context of white power structures and within a white context of normative behaviors, or its application, in order to see how some students fall victim to racial bias by adults. When eye-rolling by white girls is seen as cute and sassy, but when eye-rolling by black boys is disrespectful or defiant, the objectivity of those terms is difficult to understand. Likewise when a bandanna is contraband because it serves as a marker of gang affiliation for males of color but is allowed as a headband by white soccer players, the “objective” rule is anything but neutral.

Using a Critical Race Theory lens, it is possible to see how racialized dynamics between students and teachers, the demographic mismatch between an increasingly diverse student body and a static majority white teacher population leads to increased conflict and disciplinary actions. In a 2011 study Ulrich Boser found that “at the national level, students of color make up more than 40 percent of the public school population. In contrast, teachers of color—teachers who are not non-Hispanic white—are only 17 percent of the teaching force” (p. 1). More recently, in 2016 the percentage of teachers of color had increased to 18 percent, while the percentage of non-white students has risen to 50% (US Department of Education, 2016). Boser goes on to note that “A recent review of empirical studies also shows that students of color do better on a variety of academic outcomes if they’re taught by teachers of color” (p. 1). In racial terms, this imbalance leads to a lack of shared experience between teachers and students, which then leads to higher rates of disciplinary action for students of color than their white peers, who find shared experience in the majority of teachers in their schools (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Additionally, Downey and Pribesh (2004) noted that teacher/student racial matching has significant positive outcomes in both academic and behavioral ratings of students of color.

The presence of increased conflicts between students of color and their teachers, particularly with white teachers, contribute to the Critical Race Theory concept of valuing experiential knowledge (Sleeter, 2016). Those who are best able to understand how race functions in schools, namely the students, are the victims of a structural system of racism not the perpetrators. But students who are sent out of class, or sent home for

the day are living a racialized and largely unseen experience that is not valued by the institution. Teachers do not fear that they will be sent home as a result of bad actions against students (except in rare and extreme cases of abuse) but students observe other students being sent out of class for their actions. One of the aspects that demonstrate the structural aspect with regards to appropriate behaviors and the adults in a school, relates to the contract that governs the interactions between the union member teachers and the management role of administrators. Not only are teachers not “sent home” for bad actions against students, they are protected from accountability for similar behaviors within the adult community that students are sent out of class for. Where teachers demand students be respectful, be on time, and be on task, there is a progressive disciplinary process for teachers to be held to the same standards at staff meetings, and when dealing with each other. Students, however, do not have the protection of a union to advocate for their rights and processes.

One of the primary tenets of Critical Race Theory is that inequality arises because so much advantage in the United States is tied to control of property, which is a proxy for power. Ladson-Billings notes “the ability to define, possess, and own property has been a central feature of power in America.”(1994, p.53) The relationship between race, power, and property has created and maintained large gaps in achievement for students of color. In their seminal essay on race, Ladson-Billings and Tate note one of the tenets of “whiteness as property” is the absolute right to exclude students of color from specific schools, specific programs within schools, and most relevant to this study the right to attend school at all (1994). The relationship between school and property is directly tied

to property tax as the primary mechanism through which schools are funded, and “good” schools are related to the value of the property they serve. Through this study, I seek to explore the role race and racial consciousness have in administrator decision-making regarding exclusionary discipline, and the ways administrators describe and/or don’t mention the structures that underpin the racialized perspective of Critical Race Theory.

While Critical Race Theory provides an important way of understanding how disproportionality in exclusionary discipline occurs, there are valid critiques of it as well. Perhaps the most important critique of Critical Race Theory is that not all people of color have a universal experience and a single understanding of how race “works” in schools. The ability to generalize will always be inadequate to describe everyone’s experience (Delgado, 2012). Kaplan and Owings (2017) also note that because proponents of Critical Race Theory see factual and logical knowledge as tools for oppression, traditional research methods are not adequate methods of studying or measuring the experiences of people of color. If the system itself is set up to magnify the negative effects of racism, then all research is suspect as racially biased, which creates an impossible problem to solve. Likewise, while storytelling and lived experience have a place in research, it is not entirely clear that those methods are free from the same bias as traditional methods. With regard to this research project, a limitation exposed by Critical Race Theory is that my own position as a white, male administrator/researcher impacts the responses likely to be offered, as does the racialized power dynamic present in all research about racial concepts. A further limitation of this study is depending on administrators to indicate racial aspects of the disciplinary process when the nature of a

structural, hegemonic aspect of schooling is powerful precisely because it is not acknowledged at the level it operates.

### ***Loose Coupling Theory***

This study is focused on the decision-making process of administrators considering disciplinary actions for student behaviors. Those decisions are bounded in some ways by the policies and practices that apply to a number of schools in the same district or in the same state. The interaction between individual “units” or schools in a larger organization is related to the concept of “coupling.” Whenever there are multiple units of organization within a larger organizational frame, those units interact in alignment or without regard to alignment in various ways. The fact that school site administrators are in a position to make decisions about who stays in school and who does not, at the individual school level, demonstrates that schools and districts are loosely coupled organizations, and that policies at the state and local level will not be an adequate tool to shift the practices impacting students. In order for a system to be accurately considered “loosely coupled,” there must first be present the conditions that indicate coupling of any type as well as the specific conditions that make the coupling “loose” as opposed to tightly coupled or decoupled. Weick (1976) defines the parameters of loose coupling as elements in a system that are “responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness (Weick, 1976, p.3). Weick further explored the relationship between separateness and responsiveness when he noted “Loose coupling exists if A affects B (1) suddenly (rather than continuously), (2) occasionally (rather than constantly), (3) negligibly (rather than

significantly), (4) indirectly (rather than directly), and (5) eventually (rather than immediately)” (Weick, 1982, p. 380) The relationship between responsiveness to other elements in the system and the preservation of specific identity of each element is essential to understanding why school districts and schools are organized in this way. To address the question of coupled or not, we need simply to look at the political and geographical nature of classrooms within schools, and schools within districts. The various units (classroom, school) are coupled because they share families (students from one family in multiple classrooms, or multiple schools within a district), policies (governed by a shared board of directors), materials (copiers and computers in a school, textbooks and desks in a district), staff (specialists that teach across grade levels in a school and shared staff among different schools), and system wide resources (like food service, transportation, curriculum adoption, etc.) To answer the question of how tightly single units within an organization are coupled to other units, however, is to ask about the ability for each classroom or each school to preserve its own identity. In a single school each teacher has control of much of what happens inside the classroom, both day to day and over the course of the year. In talking about supervision, an essential managerial task, Kim Marshall argues that administrators cannot perform high level supervision at the frequency required for the complex task of teaching (2013). Because administrators have operational tasks, discipline and need to meet the demands of students, parents, the organization and teachers, there aren't enough opportunities to see all teachers with enough frequency to provide tight supervision. The simple fact that most teachers are rarely observed teaching, but teach a large number of hours indicates that schools are

loosely coupled organizations. Even in a school where there are tight structures to align grade level or content teams, each teacher has the freedom to teach and discipline students as they see fit. Often codified in contract language designed to protect the freedom of teachers and ensure they are considered professionals, the latitude teachers are offered in terms of individual decision making, including about discipline, further demonstrates how schools are, for the most part, loosely coupled organizations.

At the district level, individual schools are loosely coupled to district administration and each other, often as a function of their geographic isolation, their responsiveness to their specific population, and limited supervision. Because schools are full of teachers in dynamic contexts, with administrators outnumbered for supervision, individual teachers are free to create and improvise even when it goes against the school level or district level practice. To be clear, there are policies and practices, curriculum and materials that are designed to be uniformly implemented across school and classrooms—thus affirming that the organization is coupled. However, the inability of the system to monitor, supervise and hold accountable all aspects of the organization simultaneously is evidence of the looseness. Similarly, practices that are used at one K-5 school may not apply at either another K-5 in the same district, or even more likely, the practices may not be known by the various administrators. The variability in context resists the structures needed for a tightly coupled organization.

For the specific problem of exclusionary discipline, the looseness of the system allows individual teachers to impose their own disciplinary practices on students despite a school-wide effort to keep students in class. Individual adherence to, or rejection of,



agreed upon disciplinary practice, is an example of the looseness of the system being flexible enough to absorb change initiatives without fundamentally altering the overall operations of the school. Marion and Gonzales (2014) describe how “the looser a system is, the more likely it is to simply absorb the change agent’s efforts (p.208).”

Inversely, the looseness of the system allows for those teachers who do adopt practices to reduce exclusionary discipline to do so without having to account for the practices in other classrooms. Teachers who are early adopters or who are predisposed to a changed policy can commit to new practices without fear of negative repercussions. Additionally, one of the strategies suggested by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, quoted in Marion and Gonzales, 2013) is to find ways to tighten the coupling in order to disseminate the desired practice to the teachers and classrooms that have resisted the change. One of the facets of loosely coupled organizations is the lack of speed at which change, even desired change, is able to spread throughout an organization. In the same way that a teacher can shift the practice in their classroom without it impacting the practices in the room next door, similarly an administrator can attempt to shift the practices in their school. In a loosely coupled organization there will be countless ways the organization resists the changed practices, and there is little likelihood the change will spread to other sites within the district.

The larger the district, the greater likelihood there is added looseness of geographic isolation and decreased supervision. When considering a problem such as disciplinary practices at various schools within a district, it is difficult to even know what specifically is happening in each school, let alone within specific classrooms. Schools,

which are loosely coupled with each other are subject to the same processes and policies but with vastly different contexts and populations. The variability in schools can account for vast differences in school-based practices, which can contribute to inconsistent use of exclusionary discipline and the difficulty in reducing its use. Individual administrators are tasked with making disciplinary decisions for their individual schools, relying on a set of policies, laws, and practices that may not apply precisely in their given context. By exploring the decisions individual administrators make with regard to discipline, it may become evident that the looseness of the system allows for unfettered variability, which may account for the challenge of reducing or eliminating the use of exclusionary practices and their disproportionate application on students of color.

While thinking of schools and districts as loosely coupled systems, there are valid critiques of this model. While Loose Coupling Theory provides a framework for understanding how individual teachers can act as independent agents outside the overall direction of the school and the school can act independently from other schools in the district, it is unclear whether it is advantageous to have a tightly or loosely coupled organization in order to bring about change. Marion and Gonzales (2014) articulate that tightly coupled organizations can spread change quickly, making the system unstable as a change to one part changes everything else. However, because of the tightness of the coupling, and the potential rapid impact on the whole organization, the organization itself is resistant to change. They ask the question, “which is it?” (p. 208) and answer, both. When coupling can account for both widespread change and resistance to change it is possibly not helpful as a model to examine change. Additionally, Loosely Coupled

Theory is dependent on a hierarchical structure where information, directives, change, and resources are given out by leadership, which then either gets disseminated or not depending on the individual element's ability to absorb, and resist the change. While Loose Coupling Theory is useful in understanding how individual elements within an organization (classrooms within a school, or schools within a district, even districts within a state) affect and resist change, the theory is not complete in its description of complex school settings.

### **Complexity Theory**

There is little disagreement that schools are complex organizations. At any given moment there are competing priorities for time, energy, and budget and at every level of the organization, decisions must be made that prioritize one element over another.

Complexity theory addresses the various ways that each element both within and external to an organization affects many, if not all, other elements. According to Kaplan and Owings (2017), a complex system “contains such a variety of parts, environments, and interactions that one cannot fully understand the whole by simply analyzing the parts” (p.91). In the case of schools, the parts of the curriculum, materials, schedules, students, teachers, parents, administrators, individual programs, etc. make understanding the entire experience of a classroom or a school impossible to understand from each part. Thinking specifically about decisions about discipline made by teachers and administrators, because schools are such complex organizations, it is difficult to isolate the student behavior from the context in which that behavior occurred. When making judgments about consequences, administrators must consider, among others, the history of the

student, the circumstance of the action, the relationship between the teacher and the student as well as the relationship between the teacher and the administrator, the family and the school and the students impact on the classroom. Any single decision is sitting at the nexus of a tangle of factors that contribute to the decision to exclude a student or not.

Heifetz (1994) differentiates between “adaptive solutions,” which require additional new learning to implement, and “technical solutions,” which do not require new knowledge. Because schools and classrooms are complex, technical solutions rarely work in the long term, while adaptive solutions may take longer to implement but have longer lasting effects. In *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz (2002) describes the problem-solution process of using adaptive and technical change as the organization moves through what he calls the “zone of productive disequilibrium.” This zone is where the organization is uncomfortable, out of balance, but not so much that the change results in chaos. The adaptive organization experiments with new solutions that were not readily apparent until it finds a strategy that works and restores equilibrium. Often, however, organizations choose a technical solution which reduces disequilibrium quickly, but because the change only deals with a portion of the problem, the problem or aspects of it are likely to recur. In the case of discipline, exclusionary practices are technical solutions to complex problems. A student who misbehaves can be sent home, which quickly “fixes” the problem, but that student will likely return to school with the same behavior, same issues, and likely the same result. What is needed is what Heifetz calls new learning. In order to keep students in class, teachers would need to change something about how they operate, how they view students, how they engage learners in the

material, or possibly all of that and more. The challenge for adaptive change is that all the changes may also not work, at first, but adaptive solutions are process based and demand the stakeholders all contribute to the solution.

Seeing the problem of exclusionary discipline through the lens of Complexity Theory forces schools to rethink how they solve the problem. When a technical solution will not work in the long term, and it won't in the case of discipline, there is a need for adaptive leadership that leads to adaptive solutions. Adaptive leadership is leadership that does not come from the position of the leader, but is instead a product of the complex environment, tasks, and relationships (Kaplan and Owings, 2017) present within schools. Using the collective thinking of teacher-led teams to address complex problems opens the opportunity for creative solutions to be attempted. Heifetz argues in Complexity Theory, the "leader" position holder must purposefully create the conditions within which others may lead, and must be willing to accept new ideas and ways of operating, specifically by those most directly involved in the problem (Heifetz, 1994). Similarly, Morrison describes leadership qualities necessary to create the conditions in schools that would lead to an organization that grows and responds in the ways a complex organization would need to. Morrison notes control must be replaced with transformation, individual leadership must be replaced with democratic and dispersed leadership, and relies on experimentation and risk-taking (Morrison, 2002). One of the challenges of complexity theory as a way to understand schools is that change in a complex organization is an act of the organization itself learning. That learning takes place through "shifting the paradigm of some people teaching and others learning" (Morrison, p.101) which

requires an examination of every aspect of the organization including communication, leadership, relationships and governance. Within the specific issue of disciplinary practices, the current school model depends on power differences between the teachers and students, rules and expectations, and external structures (funding, policies, processes) that constrain the school's ability to shift their paradigm.

The primary critique of Complexity Theory is a lack of research on it. The lack of research is in part a function of the complexity the theory describes. If leadership is the interplay among complex networks, and not the work of an individual leader, how then can it be measured (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009)? The lack of research does not imply the theory is wrong, but does indicate that our understanding of it remains at a conceptual level. Using the research tools designed for isolating phenomena in order to study them will necessarily fail to accurately describe an organization that cannot be understood by viewing any one part.

Additionally, Complexity Theory depends on distributive leadership, where the leader shares the decision making in order to bring stakeholders to work on the problems. One of the concerns of shared leadership is that systems that have already privileged certain groups and members of groups are likely to replicate the same privilege in the decision-making process. In a school context, thinking specifically about discipline, shared leadership will simply empower a larger number of white educators that have found success in the educational system to make decisions that have the potential to harm communities of color. Additionally, while distributive leadership can create shared understanding about discipline at the school-wide level, the individual teachers and

administrators are still making hundreds if not thousands of decisions every day, decisions that are typically made in isolation from other stakeholders, and for various reasons. Through this research study, I begin to illuminate the ways administrators describe the complex contexts in which the decisions about excluding students are made as well as the process, criteria and various factors that contribute to exclusion.

### **Review of the Research Literature**

With a more complete understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the problem, it is important to also understand what we already know about exclusionary discipline and disproportional application of it for students of color.

Schools seek to balance the safety of the school environment for students and staff against the legal and moral mandate to educate all students in the public school system. In order to maintain schoolwide safety and order, exclusionary discipline practices are used to remove students who do not adhere to school rules. Exclusionary discipline practices are common and pervasive in American schools (Losen and Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Arredondo et al, 2014; Welsh and Little, 2018) and there is disproportionate use of exclusionary practices on students of color when compared with their white peers ( Fenning and Rose, 2007; Losen and Skiba; Skiba, 2004; Welsh and Little). While the development of exclusionary discipline practices emerged from the perspective of school safety, suspension and expulsion are frequently used for behaviors that do not indicate threat of danger. Suspension for non-dangerous behaviors is particularly frequent for African-American males, who experience the greatest likelihood of exclusion (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; May, & Tobin, 2011; Skiba, et al., 2011 ).

There is an ongoing use of exclusionary discipline throughout the United States and within the focus area of my study, Oregon. According to the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), the raw, unduplicated number of students who experienced exclusionary discipline (suspension or expulsion) has risen from 32,000 in 2015-16 to 35,000 in 2017-18. (ODE). This number counts a student only once irrespective of the number of times that specific student is suspended. The ODE data also reveals an increase in the percentage of students overall experiencing exclusionary discipline. In 2015-16 5.6% of students were excluded, and in 2016-17 it was up to 5.7%, by 2017-18 the number was 6.1%. Likewise, looking specifically at the percentage of Black/African American students excluded, the numbers again are rising. In 15-16 10.9% of Black students were excluded, and by 2017-18 it was up to 11.6%. (ODE) There has also been a recent study that looked at discipline practices in 6 districts in Oregon which represent nearly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of all students in Oregon (24%), and shows the ongoing disproportionality as it applies to Oregon specifically (Burke & Nishioka, 2014.) Oregon's data confirms the ongoing national data on the use of suspension and expulsion for a variety of offenses not limited to direct threats of safety (Skiba, et.al, 2014). Skiba et al. note that "the sheer volume of more minor infractions, in concert with the more indiscriminate use of out-of-school suspension, ensures that a greater proportion of out-of-school suspension will occur in response to more common infractions (p.644). In a study designed to examine what factors create the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline, Skiba used multivariate modeling to disentangle the school factors, student factors, and behavior factors when looking at discipline incidents and their resultant outcomes. Skiba (2014)



showed that the most predictive aspect of a disciplinary incident resulting in exclusion is the race of the student. Skiba's results corroborate other studies that have explored the role of implicit bias (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Howard, 2008) and highlights the disparity when looking at certain categories of infraction. While some infractions like fighting, weapons possession, and use of drugs are more concrete--it is easier to verify that students were fighting with each other or it requires a weapon be found and there are more objective tests for intoxication--there remains a substantial set of infractions for which the criteria are purely subjective. For the subjectively identified infractions such as defiance, disobedience and disrespect, the disproportional application of suspension and expulsion are present (Delgado, 2014; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002). Welsh and Little's findings (2017) corroborates Skiba's conclusion that race is the most predictive factor for suspension, even more than the type of infraction committed (Welsh and Little, 2017).

The research on both exclusionary discipline and its disproportional application for students of color has primarily used quantitative methods to understand what factors contribute significantly to the application of exclusionary discipline (Burke & Nishioka, 2014; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2000). Applying statistical models to existing discipline data and factoring in student demographic information, school level information and the type of infraction, makes it clear students are excluded for behaviors throughout the range of severities. It is also clear that the race of the student is most predictive of being sent home (Skiba, et. al, 2002; Skiba, et. al 2011) The disproportionality holds true for all age categories including preschool students (USDOE,

2014; Zeng, et al., 2019). What is less studied, however, is why the race of the student is so crucial in discipline outcomes, although there are some studies that exist on this topic (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Townsend, 2000). Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, for example, were able to identify that what remains after accounting for all the student factors (socio-economic, previous achievement, differences in behaviors) are the school factors. They argued that the racial disproportionality in discipline is a function of “differential selection,” or the over-identification of students of color for discipline, and “differential processing” or the over-assignment of exclusionary discipline to students of color as compared with their white peers (2010.).

In addition to the disproportionality in the existing data, there has been recent research on interventions intended to reduce both the number of exclusionary outcomes overall and the disproportionality of the outcomes. Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) has been well studied (Goh & Bambara, 2012; Safran & Oswald, 2003; Scott, Alter, Rosenberg, & Borgmeier, 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2009) and the findings are that, with rare exception, a school-wide system to promote clear expectations and focus on those that meet the expectation (positive reinforcement) creates a school culture that reduces the overall number of misbehaviors. However, despite the research, there remain schools that do not implement a school-wide system. There have been studies to understand the factors that contribute to a rejection of school-wide systems (Bambara et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2010) Other alternatives have also been studied including Restorative Justice (Michail, 2011; Browne-Dianis, 2011; Kaveney &

Drewery, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2008) and Trauma Informed Care (Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016; Baweja et al., 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016). The research on alternatives to exclusionary discipline, including programs and systems to prevent discipline infractions, have shown great success at reducing exclusionary discipline in many different levels of education, but despite the overall reduction in referrals and misbehaviors, there remains a substantial, and disproportionate number of students of color suspended each year throughout the United States and Oregon specifically.

In order to address the gap between what we know about who gets suspended for what infraction and why the discipline tool used is exclusion, there have been substantially fewer studies. There have been some studies to seek to understand the experience of students who have been excluded (Brown, 2007; Holley, 2016; Pardington, 2001; Pomeroy, 1999), which gives strong insight into the damaging impact on school outlook for excluded students. Studying student experience supports the quantitative research that shows suspension increases the risk of dropping out by giving voice to the disconnection students feel as a result of exclusion. There have also been some studies that have sought the perspective of the administrators making the decision about exclusionary discipline (Henry-Hogarth, 2018; Tookes, 2017; Nelson, 2016; Theoharis, 2008). All of these studies focus on high school administrators with the exception of Theoharis, who discusses discipline in general with regard to developing a theory about the moral alignment of administrators with disciplinary practices. Henry-Hogarth (2018) found that administrators were interested in alternatives to exclusion but felt bound to

exclusionary practices by either policy or perception by the community. Both Tookes and Nelson used a quantitative survey to discern principal perception of discipline. Tookes found that administrators noted a lack of support from district, community, and the teaching staff for alternatives to suspension and expulsion (2017), while Nelson compared the perception of exclusionary practices as effective and found that administrators acknowledged that negative impact of exclusion on students but also identified it as effective as a practice (2016). These studies highlight the importance of understanding decision-making about exclusionary discipline.

As I consider the existing literature, it is clear that the problem of exclusionary discipline has been well documented, as have the negative effects of exclusion for the student, the school, and society as a whole. It is also well documented that race is the most powerful predictor of the likelihood of experiencing exclusionary discipline. There have been fewer attempts to understand the experience of exclusion from the student and family perspective, and there are very few studies that look at the rationale of administrators who make the decision to exclude students. The few studies that exist are very recent and focus on high schools. Within Oregon there are no existing studies seeking to understand what factors are considered when administrators use exclusionary discipline and continue to apply it disproportionately. This project begins to answer the question by asking what factors are used when administrators consider suspension and expulsion, what factors exist to reduce suspensions and expulsions and what barriers are present to keeping students in school, which is to also ask what would administrators

need to have or be able to do in order to keep all kids in school. This project focuses specifically on K-8 administrators in large urban districts in Oregon.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology**

As discussed in Chapter 2, students in K-12 public schools are suspended and expelled from schools across the United States every day. It is well documented that despite a national focus on reducing the use of exclusionary discipline in recent years, it persists. The data also show that Black students, particularly male Black students, are disproportionately excluded when compared to their White peers. Numerous studies use statistical modeling to demonstrate that race is the most predictive factor in a student's likelihood of being excluded from school for discipline even more than the infraction itself for which they are being disciplined. In Oregon, the primary systemic tool that has been applied to shift the practice of exclusionary discipline has been at the policy level. Although there are a number of guides designed to help school teams explore how discipline functions in their schools with the goal of reducing exclusionary discipline and disproportionality, it is unclear if and how those guides are implemented. In 2015, for example, Oregon passed SB 553 which restricted the use of exclusionary discipline on K-5 students to a small set of conditions. SB 553, however, was an amendment on an existing statute (ORS 339.250) that had already set out guidelines for how districts should create policies about exclusionary discipline. The law already contained language that ensured the district policies were designed to "impose disciplinary sanctions without bias against students from a protected class" but the state-reported data demonstrates that the policy approach has thus far not worked to reduce the number of suspensions or

expulsions, nor has it reduced the disproportional use of exclusion impacting Black students (ORS 339.250).

In light of continuing reliance on, and persistent racial disparity in, exclusionary discipline, it is unclear what factors contribute to the continued use of exclusionary discipline, and what factors contribute to the ongoing disproportionality. For this study, my primary research question was: How do administrators of Elementary schools in Oregon describe their rationale for using exclusionary discipline? Additionally there were two secondary questions: 1) What are the factors that are used to decide when to use exclusionary discipline? and 2) What are the factors that are used to decide when to avoid using exclusionary discipline? This study investigated the decision-making process used by a sample of K-8, and K-5 principals to exclude or to not exclude students in their schools for disciplinary reasons. Specifically, the study investigated how principals experience the various pressures present in the school context surrounding the use of exclusionary discipline and whether these pressures are factors they consider in making these decisions. Principals were asked to identify any intervening considerations they use in reaching the decision to exclude or not to exclude a student for disciplinary reasons. A key focus of the investigation was to examine what factors contribute to the decision to exclude or not to exclude a student for disciplinary reasons. (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

### **Methodology**

This study is a qualitative study which explores what factors lead to disciplinary decisions resulting in exclusion of any students, and also what factors lead to disciplinary decisions to not exclude any students. The methodology for this study was to conduct

two sequential qualitative processes, resulting in a multi-method study using focus groups and individual interviews. The study began with focus groups that were facilitated to address the primary and secondary research questions. These questions emerged from both my lived experience as a white, male principal in a public school system facing situations that could result in exclusionary discipline and from the above study of the literature that exposes the gap between what the educational community knows is best for kids and what actually happens in schools across Oregon and the United States.

Focus groups were initially developed by Lazarsfeld and Merton in the 1940s to study the responses of listeners of a radio program. While listening to the radio program participants were asked to push a red or green button in order to indicate where they felt favorable or negative about the program. This data was then used to form “focused interviews” with the participants (Morgan, 2019). This method was refined throughout the 40s and 50s and resulted in what was called “group focussed interviews” and shortened to Focus Groups. The second phase of focus groups was used extensively in marketing research and that remains the most common use of focus groups today. More recently focus groups have re-emerged as a tool for leveraging the power of group dynamics during the interview and highlighting the flexible nature of participant thinking. Morgan notes “it is important not to think of experiences as fixed, inflexible things that are simply waiting to be described” (Morgan, 2019 p. 18).

In education research specifically, the earlier uses of focus groups gathered student opinions on change initiatives (Dickson, 2000), to gain deeper understanding of previously collected quantitative data (Bellenger, et al., 1976), and to develop items for a



survey or questionnaires (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Michele Jarrell (2000) articulates the potential advantages of focus groups, but it is clear from her work in 2000 there were few researchers using focus groups with any regularity.

Morgan (2014) notes two primary research benefits to using focus groups. First, Morgan notes there is a dynamic interaction between participants that can yield different data than can be gathered through individual interviews. It is this very interaction that this study was interested in, in part because although schools are dynamic, complicated organizations situated within the larger policy and practice contexts of school districts and states, administrators typically make exclusionary discipline decisions in relative isolation. By providing the space and community to openly discuss the experience of decision making as a group, it is likely there will be data collected that would not be revealed were there only individual interviews. Additionally, there is an efficiency of getting multiple respondents to address a topic at the same time (Morgan, 2019).

Although it can be difficult to schedule a focus group, once assembled, the group allows individual responses that in an individual interview require as many hours as there are participants. In addition to the benefits of focus groups when compared with individual interviews, there are also concerns with focus groups. Bristol and Fern (2003) are critical of what they call “group influences,” but Morgan (2019) notes that seeing group influence as negative implies there is something more pure or true about individual interviews, which ignores that individual interviews are a context with complex dynamics as well.

The primary concern with focus groups is tightly bound with the efficiency of them. Because the group is made up of a larger number of participants, there is necessarily less time for each participant to contribute to the prompt. This very concern is what necessitates the use of individual interviews as follow up. Morgan identifies a basic metric to differentiate between the two methods. If the primary goal is to get in-depth narratives, the individual interview is preferred, if the goal is to get consensus and diversity among a group, then focus groups are preferred. In this case the sequential use of both methods allowed this study to get consensus and diversity in order to guide the purposive in-depth interviews. This organizational method was used successfully in a study of the experiences of women who had survived breast cancer (Pedersen, Delmar, Falkmer, & Grønkjær, 2016). In that study the researchers used the focus group to guide the categories of inquiry for the individual interviews. Although the topic and field are very different in this context, the use of the focus group to guide the individual interviews applies to this study.

My use of focus groups highlights the various reasons principals mention for using exclusionary discipline practices and what reasons are mentioned to avoid using it as well. I used an emergent design, with the flexibility to allow the focus groups to explore more deeply the specific issues they find most interesting. Between each of the three focus groups, I identified areas where there was a need for more information or discussion and adjusted the questions to reflect that area of need. By using three distinct focus groups, I achieved the needed saturation to ensure the full range of responses to the prompts were addressed. Saturation, in the case of focus groups, can refer to two main

ways the researcher knows there is no new data to be gathered on the topic. According to Glaser (1967), saturation is when the addition of additional groups would create no new theoretical concepts or insights. Recently, however, there has been a move to consider saturation when there are no new codes generated from the data of the most recent focus group (Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2016). Guest et al. conducted a study of focus group research and found that “80% codes were discoverable in the first 2 to 3 focus groups” (p. 3). They further identify that one of the challenges of identifying the proper number of focus groups to achieve saturation is that the overall number of groups must be identified before the study is begun, but it is only through a process of analyzing the data and codes that the researcher could know if they have achieved saturation (2016).

After the initial phase with focus groups, I turned to individual interviews in order to get more specific and detailed information from individual participants. Because this study was emergent and depended on the specific topics the focus group addresses, I used the interviews to get clarification on participant ideas as well as validation that the data collected was accurate. The groups were formed using purposeful sampling, within my sample, to identify additional interviews.

### **Participants**

For this study I recruited 15 currently serving administrators in a K-8 context who were split into 3 focus groups of 5 participants each. They were all recruited from within the large urban districts that comprise the Portland metropolitan area. I used purposeful sampling, which is based on the idea that the investigator “must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 97). I intentionally sought

out administrators who met specific criteria related to the ability to answer the research questions, and who have enough shared experience to create the conditions of sharing common ground in the group. The criteria were:

1. Must be a currently serving administrator in a K-5 or K-8 school in Oregon
2. Must consider themselves positioned to make decisions about exclusionary discipline at the school at which they serve.
3. Must be in at least the second consecutive year at the current school in order to have an entire year worth of outcomes with respect to discipline practices.

Although purposeful sampling provides participants that are likely to provide information rich responses, it is important to also actively avoid creating groups that have obvious biases. The pool of administrators from which I drew had members that represent various identities with respect to gender, race, and ethnicity. I used heterogeneous groups for each of the focus groups to help ensure that individuals do not get isolated by their identities, however because of the limited number of participants, it was difficult to factor in the multiplicity of identities of both the participants themselves and the schools within which they work. Morgan notes the danger of isolating “tokens” and that one of the considerations for the groups is participant comfort (2019). For this study, however, I also considered how school characteristics can further isolate participants. In a group of administrators where all but one serves in a high poverty school, there may be discomfort because the context of their work is so different.

At the time of the focus groups and interviews, I was a currently serving administrator in a K-5 school within one of the districts included in this study. I am

particularly aware of the potential advantages and disadvantages of my own positionality. During the study, as a white, male principal, I am aware that my own relationship to exclusionary discipline is within the bounds of this study, and I am an insider as a researcher. I specifically excluded myself as a participant in the research in order to gather data that accurately reflects the thoughts and ideas of other administrators in my similar position. An advantage of my role as an insider was the underlying trust and safety afforded by a facilitator who understands the demands of the position of decision maker with respect to discipline. This familiarity added credibility between the subjects and the interviewer.

After the initial focus groups were complete, I used the coded transcripts to create interview questions for concepts and ideas that need further clarification. This sequential method highlights the emergent nature of the study and accounts for the lack of depth of response typically present in a focus group.

## **Procedures**

### **Figure 2**

## **Procedures**



Note. (Creswell & Cresswell, 2016)

Creswell and Cresswell (2016) describe the process of gathering qualitative data as a series of steps that while typically sequential, can be approached out of sequence or returned to as needed throughout the study. For this study, I located the participants through emails sent to sitting administrators with consultation from district level supervisors. The email described the project and the research questions, as well as the methods I would use to gather data. I included in the email the informed consent form as well as the assurances of confidentiality. From the administrators that responded, I scheduled the focus groups based on their availability, while also ensuring the groups did not isolate any members based on specific identifications. Because of the implementation of COVID-19 protocols, the format for the focus groups was shifted to virtual meeting rooms (googlemeet), and the consent documents were obtained through a verbal acknowledgement by each participant before the first question.

My first focus group functioned as a pilot and intentionally included participants that met the criteria but were also peers of mine so that I could gather feedback about the process as well as the research topic when the group was concluded. By using a pilot group, I was able to understand how specific questions functioned and examine shortcomings of my design. The pilot group did not yield any substantial changes to the process or the questions, and served as the first group.

The focus groups were held in a virtual meeting room that was scheduled to be convenient for the members of the group, which ensured adequate confidentiality. Each member was in control of their personal setting and was able to create the conditions that suited their needs. During the focus groups, I moderated using a set of exploratory questions related to the overall research question (see Appendix C). The questions were written to elicit the maximum amount of conversation among the participants and were not needed to be modified after each focus group, however, because of the emergent design, not all questions were addressed at the same depth in each group. I used the video recording feature within Googlemeet to record the focus group and used an iPhone with “voice memo” as a backup recording. This ensured the data would be collected even in the event of a malfunction with one of the devices. Once complete, the recording was transcribed using an automated transcription service, which required that I manually check the transcription for accuracy against the recording. The transcript included speaker identification and time stamps. All recordings and transcripts were stored electronically in a password protected cloud-based storage drive and printed versions were stored in a locked drawer in my locked house.

I coded the responses to the focus group questions using a combination of coding approaches. The first was a framework analysis, which uses a matrix to categorize the responses within the theoretical frameworks described earlier<sup>1</sup> (Figure 3). This method relies on summary information instead of strict coding and allows each respondent's answer to each question to fit within the matrix of the various theoretic frames I have used to understand the problem (Silver & Lewins, 2014).

**Figure 3**

**Framework Matrix with Sample Codes**

<p><b>Behaviorism</b> Need to find “trigger” Function of behavior</p>	<p><b>Critical Race Theory</b> Whose norms are being used? It's all racial, I'm a white principal</p>
<p><b>Loosely Coupled Theory</b> Mandatory suspensions Expectation to call supervisor Other schools have different supports</p>	<p><b>Complexity Theory</b> Discipline is encompassing Staff, routines, decisions Role of staff culture and needing people “on board”</p>

In Figure 3, a respondent mentioned that they sought to understand the function of the behavior when presented with a scenario of a student who required discipline. That would be coded in the upper left box “Behaviorism.” Likewise, when asked what would help shift the use of disciplinary practices, a respondent answered that there needed to be a shift in the culture of the staff as that group pushed back on any discipline decisions that were not aligned with the staff understanding of discipline. That response was coded in “Complexity Theory” as the culture of the staff involves multiple people,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix E.



leadership, time and exists beyond the specific discipline incident and even beyond discipline in general. As specific ideas were placed into the matrix, I was able to better understand where there were gaps in how principals described what is being considered as they weigh discipline decisions. As the study progressed, this matrix helped identify when there was saturation of ideas. Additionally, by hosting the focus groups, transcribing and coding the data I was able to use an emergent model that allowed me to consider shifting the emphasis of the subsequent focus group in order to clarify and elaborate on particular topics that become apparent throughout the earlier processes (Morgan, 2019). This same technique was used to indicate the need for follow up interviews to get more detail or clarification about specific statements.

In addition to the original Framework approach, I further coded the data within each of the framework sections. By looking at the individual sections, I was able to sort and group the responses into specific sub-categories within each matrix area. This process yielded a 4x4 matrix that included the ideas and concepts initially identified<sup>2</sup>. I then added in vivo coding to the second matrix along with specific quotes that showed the participants' own words. (see Figure 4)

#### **Figure 4**

##### **Second Phase Coding Matrix**

<b>Behaviorism</b>		<b>Critical Race Theory</b>	
Students	Teachers	Whiteness	Staff of Color

---

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix F

Administrators	Families/Parents	History of Racism	Community
<b>Loosely Coupled Theory</b>		<b>Complexity Theory</b>	
Staffing	Discipline Definitions and Responses	Relationships	Contexts
Laws/Policies	Collaboration	Resources	Role of Discipline

I also coded the data using an open method to capture various themes that emerge and don't match the framework matrix sections. Although the majority of the responses fit into the theoretic matrix I envisioned for this project, there were some ideas, themes and concepts that I had not thought of, and ideas that did not fit discreetly into any of the pre-existing categories in the Framework approach. For those ideas I relied on in vivo coding to capture the specific phrases that the respondents use in their own language. Saldana (2013) notes that in vivo coding allows respondents to use their own words and not need to rely on technical jargon to describe their own experiences.

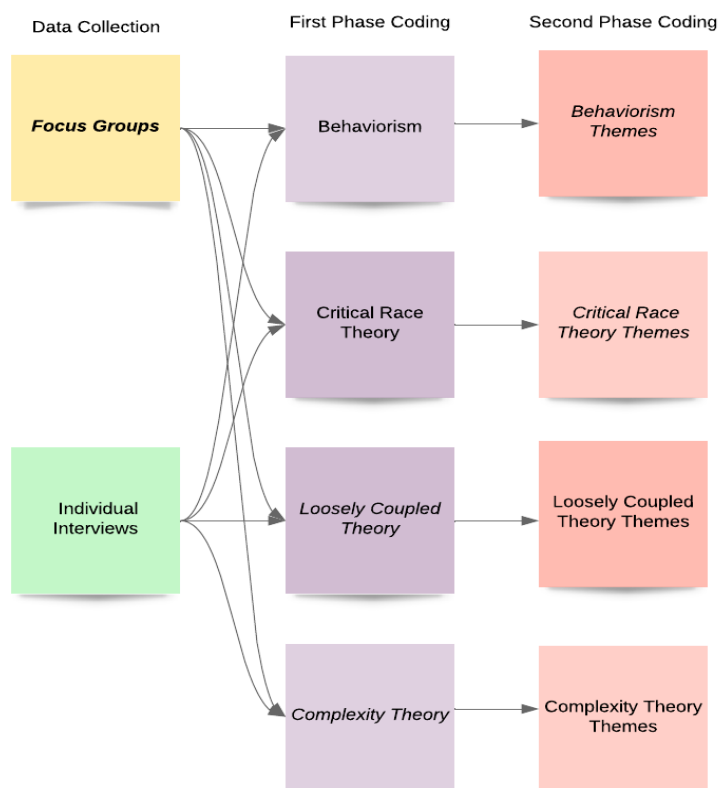
After the focus group phase, I examined the coded data in order to identify specific participants and ideas that need deeper understanding. Some of the participants were further interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their approach to discipline or to get a deeper understanding of a specific case, problem or reason that was mentioned in the focus group. Although I didn't know in advance which participants would be used for follow-up interviews, I was able to highlight those members that disclosed unique reasons for their decision making, those that had particularly interesting examples and those that did not contribute as fully to the group. This allowed me to ensure that the

group setting did not inhibit full responses from any of the participants. Morgan (2019) notes that in focus groups with issues tied closely to the participant identity (which I believe discipline practices are aligned to educator identity) the use of individual interviews can allow participants to offer more in-depth information about “interesting ideas” that came up in the focus group (p.20). In all, I identified 4 individuals that were then individually interviewed.

Like the focus groups, the individual interviews were done using a virtual video meeting platform (Googlemeets). Each participant was sent the consent documents and verbally acknowledged their consent at the start of the meeting. The meeting was recorded using the built-in recording feature in Google Meet, and I used an iPhone with an audio recording program in order to capture a backup recording. The individual interviews asked only three questions (see Appendix D) the first of which was related to why they were selected to participate in the second phase of the study. In each case the participant had said something that needed a more complete understanding. The individual interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were also transcribed using the same transcription program and manual verification/correction. After each individual interview I applied the same coding process to first place ideas into the matrix of theoretical concepts, then I used a second phase coding to further categorize the responses within the original matrix (See Figure 5)

## **Figure 5**

### ***Data Analysis Process***



I provided transcripts of the focus groups and individual interviews to each participant and used those transcripts to verify accuracy and validity of the data. This form of member checking served as a check on my biases in the event that I did not accurately present responses that are counter to my own understanding of the question and range of responses. After the conclusion of the coding, I reconvened each of the focus groups in order to allow them to see the coding matrix in order to provide another level of member checking. Additionally, because the research questions specifically call out both the rationale for using exclusionary discipline and the rationale for not using exclusionary discipline, the study's bias against exclusionary discipline was

acknowledged. All collected data were stored in a locked cabinet within a locked house, and electronic information including recordings and transcripts was stored in a password protected secure cloud-based digital account. In order to assure participants' confidentiality, each participant is unnamed in the finding section and during the conclusions section are only referred to as either a non-specific pronoun or in a few instances a pseudonym.

This study was designed to get insight into the underlying reasons administrators use when making decisions that result in exclusionary discipline actions, as well as those underlying reasons that avoid those same outcomes. Using focus groups allowed the administrators to articulate and reflect within a peer group, an action that is primarily done in isolation or with a supervisor, but rarely in a community of like-positioned decision makers. Additionally, the individual interview format allowed me to get an in-depth understanding of specific issues or topics that were brought up in the focus group. The combined method yielded insights and produced themes that expand the understanding of the factors principals consider when thinking about exclusionary discipline.

## Chapter 4: Findings

As detailed in Chapter 3, this study consisted of two sequential qualitative processes, which began with a series of focus group interviews followed by targeted individual interviews. The groups and interviews were organized to answer the primary research question of the study: How do administrators of Elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest describe their rationale for using exclusionary discipline? Additionally, the focus groups were designed to also address two secondary research questions:

1. What are the factors that are used to decide when to use exclusionary discipline?
2. What are the factors used to decide to avoid using exclusionary discipline?

The first step in this process involved hosting 3 separate focus groups consisting of 5 participants in each group. Because of COVID protocols, the focus groups were conducted using an online video meeting program and recorded for later transcription. In each of the focus groups, all members were current principals serving in either K-5 or K-8 public schools in urban districts in the Pacific Northwest. Each principal had, at least, two consecutive years at their school and considered themselves the person responsible for disciplinary decisions in their school.

After the three focus groups had concluded, additional interviews were conducted with selected individual members the focus groups based upon their responses in the focus group, which included the need for additional information about a specific issue

that was brought up but not fully explained in the focus group, or to allow participants to further explain a concept that was unique or otherwise important to learn more about.

At the conclusion of each focus group the recording was transcribed using a machine generated transcription program that was then hand verified and corrected against the recording. Each focus group's transcript was then printed and during the first reading was marked according to the framework analysis approach which codes responses against a matrix of the theoretical frameworks described earlier. Each response was then entered into the matrix and each matrix region was subjected to a second coding process. Within each matrix area, which corresponds to one of the theoretical frameworks, the responses were viewed through an open method that captures themes that emerge from the data within the specific framework concept. Each focus group was treated independently, with its own matrix and process and then combined into a single compilation matrix with corresponding themes. Upon reviewing the responses in the various areas of the matrix, I was able to identify specific comments and ideas that individual respondents offered that led to individual interviews.

The same approach was used with the individual interviews. Each individual interview was recorded, transcribed and coded in the same matrix. The matrices were then combined into a single document that was then coded for themes. The themes that emerged from the three focus groups and four individual interviews formed the basis for the findings I will now describe. All coding decisions represent the judgment of the principal investigator, although the transcripts and codes were shown to the participants to verify that they felt correctly represented.

The codes were originally sorted into four distinct categories, matching the four Theoretical frames discussed in Chapter 2. Responses that indicated a Behaviorist approach were placed in that section, while responses that applied to Critical Race Theory, Loosely Coupled Theory and Complexity Theory were each placed into their corresponding matrix section. Those four sections were then coded using a second process that organized the responses into themes. In order to review the data, I will address each of the four framework areas that made up the Theoretic lenses, one at a time exploring the various themes that emerged from the second round of coding.

### **Behaviorism**

One of the primary theoretical frames through which educators and the education system view discipline and disciplinary actions is behaviorism. Behaviorism is predicated on the relationship between an observable action and its resulting consequence. While it is too simplistic, and not accurate to say schools are purely behaviorist, it is also clear that discipline policy and practice are heavily rooted in a basic behaviorist model. According to this model, individuals take actions in order to gain or avoid attention, items or experiences and they are either reinforced by getting what they want and avoiding what they don't want, or they are punished by losing what they want or being unable to avoid what they are trying to avoid (Zhou & Brown, 2015). This process of attaining or losing through rewards, i.e., reinforcements, or punishments, i.e., negative consequences, influence behavior. The theory posits that behavior can be understood as the outcome of this process of rewards and punishments. In the context of this study, principals' strict understanding of the model and its fidelity of application in a



school setting are less important than their recognition that the behaviorist approach is operating within the discipline process.

In a modern educational context it is well understood that there are often competing factors within the function of the behavior, but schools operate on the understanding that students must meet behavioral expectations or the adults will impose disciplinary consequences. These actions are typically codified into a student handbook or discipline guidance document to capture the codified behavioral expectations and rules of the school. For this study, there is an added layer of behavioristic framing as the adults, too, are subject to performing actions that are similarly reinforced (rewarded) and punished within the context of enforcing behavioral expectations and consequences for students. For example, a teacher may be inadvertently rewarded by calling the office, if it results in another adult coming to the classroom to manage a student. Similarly, a parent may be rewarded with increased attention on their student if they meet with the teacher and express a concern. This is true for all adults in a school including those that hold the role of teacher, administrator and parent. In discovering themes in the behaviorist area of the matrix, it became clear that for behaviorism, “who” is doing the behavior is an important category of understanding. The themes are thus organized around the concept of who is using behavior to get their needs met.

### ***Students***

Throughout the interviews every focus group frequently referenced a behavioral perspective with respect to students, student behaviors and how the discipline system is based in a behavioristic model. Additionally, all of the individual interview participants

specifically mentioned behaviorist concepts when discussing specific student outcomes. The participants referenced student behaviors and behavior management in two distinct ways. The first referenced behaviorism in ways that reduced the likelihood of an exclusionary outcome, while the second described ways through which the behaviorism lens increased the use of exclusionary outcomes.

For example, in one focus group a participant noted that at their school students that are having ongoing behaviors are brought to a specific team that creates a behavior support plan. This plan, which is based on a functional understanding of behavior, is designed specifically to reduce the need for reactive, and possibly exclusionary discipline. The student would be rewarded for appropriate behaviors in order to increase them. Another participant, however, shared that in their school, students can be aware of the responses they can elicit with certain behaviors and create a pathway to what they want. The principal shared an example of a student that hated doing math, and knew that shouting out would get them sent out of class during math time. In this case, the behaviorist approach rewards the student with an exclusion from class.

When describing student behaviors, participants identified a number of aspects of a schoolwide culture that were designed to make clear what the expectations were in order to support students staying within those expectations. When asked what discipline means in their school context, one participant responded with “expectations that are taught and reinforced,” another shared discipline is helping students know “expected and unexpected behaviors,” and a third shared it is “making sure the expectations we have for students are appropriate for their age and developmental level.”

One participant also noted that in many cases the behaviors that were occurring frequently were “developmentally appropriate.” Another participant agreed, noting that there is a predictability to which students were going to be subject to discipline. One principal noted “Some of it is predictable—like spring soccer with 4th grade boys.” Another spoke of a student who “couldn’t keep his hands to himself, like a seven, eight-year old, which is very typical behavior especially for a boy.” In all the focus groups respondents included terms like “support,” and “what they need,” to indicate how the school responded to students who were showing that their needs were not met at that moment.

Participants also noted that there are discipline processes within the school that rely on Functional Behavioral Assessments, looking at antecedents, triggers, what is reinforced and rewarded, what is punished and the creation of safety plans. In each of the focus groups there was specific reference to “FBA,” “Safety Plan,” “Behavior Support Plan,” and “De-escalation cycles” as behavioristic approaches to managing behaviors in order to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline.

Participants also referenced behaviorism, with respect to students, when describing an increased likelihood of exclusionary discipline. Participants described students who were “out of control” and needed to be removed from the classroom to de-escalate, to get a break and to reset. One respondent commented about students knowing “how to get out of class” and in one case they described that a student knew “if he kicked his teacher he would get to go home.” In one case a participant described intricate behavior plans that were developed as a result of an exclusionary process. The principal

shared “there were times we needed a day to get everyone on the same page, so the kid had to be home so we could be safe when he came back.” In addition to the use of behavior plans, the participants described students who preferred to be out of the classroom and were reinforced by the discipline system that removed them from class for skipping class.

Although schools are primarily about students, and discipline is considered a “student management” issue, it is clear from the responses to the focus group questions and the individual follow up interviews that students are only one part of the ways that behaviorism functions in a school setting.

### *Teachers*

In addition to describing the many ways that students are impacted and viewed through a behaviorist lens, the participants also shared how the teachers themselves were not only using behavioristic approaches, but were subject to them as well. Similar to the responses about student behaviorism leading to exclusionary outcomes while other times reducing exclusionary outcomes, viewing the actions and beliefs of teachers through a behaviorist lens also contributes to administrator’s decision making with respect to discipline.

When asked to describe instances of students being removed from class, but not being formally suspended, one participant noted that teachers send students “out” to the hallway, to the office and even home without using the schoolwide or distinct process for discipline. In that focus group other participants agreed and acknowledged that “teachers don’t want that kid back in the room right now” and “teachers need a kid to be taken

away from class.” It was noted that these removals did not always involve the referral or documentation process. Participants also shared the use of “buddy classrooms” where a teacher has an assigned partner teacher where students are sent when the teacher decides they need to go out of class. One principal shared that one of their first actions upon moving to a new school was to eliminate buddy classrooms because “it allows teachers to avoid solving the problem.” Participants also shared that teachers set up desks outside the classroom, and recruit other adults to give students “breaks.” These strategies are seen by the participants as ways for teachers to “make systems that work for them, but aren’t known throughout the school.” One interesting concept is that teachers that find alternate ways to remove students for an amount of time are seen as excluding students when it is self-created, but when it is integrated into a behavior plan, it is seen as supportive.

When discussing the responsive approach to discipline, participants were asked a question that set up a scenario where they are called down to a classroom because of student behavior. In describing the considerations for actions they would or could take, in all 3 focus groups participants mentioned needing to pay close attention to the teacher. Participants noted that there are teachers who are more likely to need support for behaviors. For instance, one participant said “I know the teachers that set kids off all the time,” and another indicated that when they enter a classroom for a behavior situation “it can be tricky because I have teachers that will not own their own triggering behaviors.” It was mentioned repeatedly that part of the consideration for removing a student is giving the teacher time to de-escalate, and that some teachers exert pressure on the

administrator to keep the student out of class. One participant said that “sending the student out, or calling me in is easy. There is a lack of problem solving on the teacher's part.” One participant noted that teachers sometimes want a student suspended because it is “an easy way to get a break from that kid” and is a visible expression of consequences.

When asked about how the disciplinary process functions in the school, participants in all focus groups acknowledged the role of the referral itself as a behaviorist tool. One participant explained that one part of the beginning of the year professional development meetings included a clarification of the roles and responsibilities within the discipline process. This participant noted that she “sets the tone in the beginning of the year that says what needs to be done by the teacher before there can be an administrative response.” Similarly, one participant noted that the year they were appointed to their school, some teachers felt they “were not supposed to write referrals because [they] would get in trouble.” One principal talked about the use of radio walkie-talkies and that they “make it too easy to call for help” so they were taken away from teachers except as a part of a specific safety plan. These comments show the clear relationship principals see between actions teachers take and the ways those actions are reinforced or punished.

In addition to behavioristic approaches that lead to increased exclusionary practices, participants in this study also identified ways that the behaviorist lens explains practices that decrease exclusionary practices. Participants described how teachers are reinforced by each other and the school community for creating a strong classroom community. One participant noted that in staff meetings teachers are acknowledged

aloud for specific practices that support students. Another participant mentioned how providing supports to the teacher (as opposed to removing the student) has reduced the number of kids out of class and being sent home. In behaviorist terms, sending help to the teacher replaces the previous behavior of removing the student. It meets the same teacher need, that the student is no longer disrupting the class, but does so in a way that also meets the student need of getting help, or attention or whatever was the unmet need. One principal noted that when teachers feel they are out of ideas, they fall back on the ideas they know, which is to send students to the office. Participants shared that working with teachers on their behavior management skills directly reduced the exclusionary practices.

### *Administrators*

When participants describe the pressures to both remove students for disciplinary reasons and the pressures to keep students in school there is an aspect of behaviorism in their own actions. Like the perspective acknowledged about teachers, the administrators described how a behavioristic lens informs their actions with respect to their own decision making.

When asked about times when a student was sent home (suspended) many participants indicated that they used exclusionary practices in order to accomplish the other tasks they or other staff members had to do throughout the day. Specifically, for one principal it was described as “it is easier to send the kid home instead of having to find staff members to deal with this all day” and another asked themselves “do we really have the ability to do this [support a single student] all day?” One administrator shared “I think sometimes it's easier, even if you're not consciously thinking about it, it's easier just

to make the problem go away for a bit and then really deal with what needs to be dealt with.” This idea was also described as “[we] need people to sit with the one kid otherwise we don’t get anything done.”

Principals also describe the reinforcement for suspending students goes beyond the time and energy reclaimed by not dedicating a staff member or themselves to a single student. There is also the fulfillment of the other adults’ notion that “something needs to be done.” One participant described it as “I think sometimes we resort to exclusion just because it makes it easier. I then don't have to deal with that adult because they see that something was done instead of just having that trust.” This concept was described as a calculation that attempts to balance the work and stress of sending kids home against the work and stress of dealing with time, staff, and pushback from other adults in the school.

In terms of district level supervision participants noted a lack of accountability with respect to suspensions. One participant said “I’m neither held accountable nor is anyone celebrating that I’m not suspending kids,” while another stated “Nobody is calling me to the carpet for the first two years when I was suspending kids left and right.” Both of these responses demonstrate that administrators feel neither punished nor rewarded for their outcomes with respect to suspensions from the system, but they feel rewards and punishments at the relationship and work load level inside their school.

### ***Families***

In addition to the students, teachers and administrators, there is another prominent constituent with respect to student behavior. Behind every incident are families of students who are being disciplined as well as the families of the students who were



harmful during an incident. When participants were asked to respond to a scenario of student discipline, all of the participants mentioned needing to involve the families of the students. The participants shared there is, in each school, a process for who calls the family and when that call happens. For some of the students the phone calls are a part of the behavior support plan, while for others it is a part of the response to an incident.

Participants also described ways that they viewed family contact and involvement through a behaviorist lens. Some participants described inviting family members into the school in order to have them share the “burden of supervision when their kid is acting out all day.” Other participants indicated that the use of suspension was a burden to the families who then needed to arrange for supervision for the day at home. One participant spoke about having to call the same families time and again for discipline issues, and that the “families stop answering the phone.” One participant also shared that some families wanted their student suspended in order to “show the kid that the violation was serious.” It was also shared that some families would come take their student home even when that wasn’t asked of them directly.

It was also shared by one participant that bringing families into the school could reduce the exclusion because the family would be asked to stay and support the student. This was referred to as “suspending the family” and was explained as a way to keep the student in class and provide a consequence to the family. When mentioned in the focus group, there was agreement across the group that that idea was excellent, and some principals indicated they were going to try it.

When organizing the responses and ideas into themes during the second phase of coding, the behaviorism responses fell into the four categories addressed. Within each category it became clear that there were responses that indicated behaviorist concepts lead to reduced use of exclusionary practices and also responses that indicated behaviorist concepts that would lead to increased use of exclusionary discipline. The responses showed a clear reliance on behaviorist thinking with regards to discipline, but the responses also showed how those same behaviorist ideas fail to provide guidance to impact the use of exclusionary discipline.

### **Loosely Coupled/Tightly Coupled Organizations**

Although behaviorism is one of the lenses through which the responses by the administrators were categorized, it is not the only one. In any large organization there are various ways in which the various parts of the whole system interact with one another. In a school system, these parts are individual schools interacting with other schools, and within any single school there are interactions that occur between classrooms, programs, departments and grade levels. As discussed in earlier chapters, some aspects of a school are tightly coupled to one another—when something changes, it changes quickly and similarly across all like parts of the school. A new bell schedule, for instance, will happen for everyone at the same time. Leaving one area and going to another will be a tightly coupled experience for all students regardless of the teacher, the classroom or the subject they are learning. Outside of one specific school, however, it gets more difficult to find tight coupling. One of the challenging aspects of managing a dynamic school building with staff, students, parents, volunteers and visitors is understanding what

aspects of the organization are tightly coupled with other sites (schools) and which aspects are loosely coupled, or flexibly understood by the administrators (Marion & Gonzales, 2012). There were responses in all three focus groups that addressed the tightness or looseness of the organizational structures as they related to discipline and exclusionary outcomes. The responses were coded to Loose Coupling Theory if they addressed aspects of the school that individual principals felt they could make decisions about freely or, alternately, if they felt constrained. The responses that met the Loose Coupling criteria were then organized into four categories based on the aspect of the school they aligned with. The categories were Staffing, Discipline Definitions/Responses, Laws/Policy implementation, and Collaboration with other groups inside and out of the school itself.

### ***Staffing***

One of the more consistent responses across all focus groups and individual interviews was the idea that staffing was in some ways constrained (tightly coupled) and in other ways was flexible (loosely coupled). Throughout all the groups participants shared that the staffing allocation, which is the number of adults in the school, coupled with the specific roles adults were assigned had a substantial impact on the disciplinary outcomes and the ability for a school to reduce the exclusionary actions. Principals indicated that students that had bigger behavior needs took substantial staff resources. In the focus groups one participant shared that “I assign a staff member to be with a kid if there are any people available” and “we deploy staff to the kid in crisis, until we can’t.” Likewise, another principal acknowledged that it was frequently an administrator who

had to respond to student behavior. One principal said “it would be me” and another went down a list that included counselors, assistant principals and themselves.

In all three groups, participants noted that matching the staffing resources to the needs of the school was an essential part of setting up the school, but that they were constrained by the titles, roles and job descriptions of certain positions as well as the specific amount of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff (which is used as a measure of staffing levels in schools) allocated overall. However, some principals were able to leverage alternate funding sources for additional staff specifically for behavior support, while others noted that their school did not have any flexible staffing allocation. Some principals noted that within the allocation, there is some flexibility, i.e., loosely coupled organizational staffing, on the type of position which can have a substantial impact on the ability for students to remain at school. One principal spoke of switching one position from academic support to behavior support from one year to the next and that it “made a difference” in their ability to respond to student behaviors which had previously resulted in exclusions. Another responded that at other schools where they served, there were more adults so they could “keep it up longer before having to consider sending a student home.”

In addition to the overall number of adults on the staff in a school, there was also a recognition that each staff member brings a somewhat specific set of strengths and challenges to the discipline process. This diversity allowed principals to think of staffing responsibilities and organizational responses in a variety of creative ways that were not tightly bound to a specific job title or description, i.e., loosely coupled responsibilities.

When given a behavior scenario with a disruptive student, one principal shared that they would seek out the “adult in the school that has the best relationship with the student.” Another participant added, “it was at times a case manager for special education, the counselor, a former teacher, an elective/enrichment teacher, and at times the assistant principal or principal. One principal noted that “who works with a specific kid depends on their relationship,” and another used the term “safest” to indicate the staff member the student felt most comfortable with.

Many of the participants suggested that individual personality types and teaching styles could either escalate or de-escalate behavioral situations. One principal indicated that to shift the use of exclusionary practice it took “buy-in from the staff” but that took some time. Another principal noted that there had to be some shifts in staffing made in order to support the work of keeping students in school and in class: “we’ve made some shifts there, with my staff, we have a lot of shifts there.” When asked for clarity, the principal shared that they felt constrained by the staffing process, but there were creative ways to move people into different roles which changed the culture of the school and the use of exclusionary discipline. These flexible responses to staffing needs and linking the best person to the problem reflected the importance of loosely defined assignments and flexibility for the principal to match the best person for the specific need or situation.

Another aspect of staffing and its impact on disciplinary decision making has to do with the “tight coupling” of the various bargaining groups inside of a school community. It was shared during one focus group that, for instance, some work groups have specific language that allow them to refuse to support students with certain types of

behaviors. One principal felt compelled to change a specific position in the school because the new position was not a part of the bargaining unit that could refuse to support kids that were having behavioral episodes. They said “an AP can respond to whatever happens, but some other work groups won’t and do refuse.” There were also responses that revealed how some teacher contracts allowed members to refuse to serve students that exhibited certain types of behaviors. While no principal mentioned it being used in their school, they were all aware of the rule. It was also noted that within a school teams of teachers would share an approach to student discipline, but that that approach was not necessarily adopted school wide, which is a strong example of how tight and loose coupling can exist within a single practice and within a single site, not to mention between schools.

### ***Behavior Definitions***

In addition to the role of staffing and how individual staff members interact with discipline, the respondents indicated that there was great variance in how specific behaviors were defined, and what responses were called for. Principals indicated variance starts with an inconsistent understanding of what behavior is considered problematic. Administrators noted there is a wide range in the definition of discipline, as well as how to define each behavior. In one focus group it was noted that “what counts as a big behavior in one school is not in another” and “schools send home kids for lesser behaviors when they don’t have many behaviors in the first place.” This difference was echoed throughout the focus groups and there was an acknowledgement that it varies “school by school.”

Beyond labeling behaviors consistently within a school and between schools and districts, participants also noted the inconsistent application of consequences for behavioral violations. Some principals shared that “some schools send kids home” for what another school would not. At one school, a principal shared that when they arrived at the school there was a rule that applied a different consequence to a fight if the hand was open (slap style) as opposed to closed (fist style). This principal noted that “some kids could slap someone and cause injury while a light closed fist punch wouldn’t.” Principals noted that there are written definitions to attempt to align the discipline process across the district, but that there was considerable room for interpretation. One principal noted that this looseness was helpful to reduce exclusions, but they could see how it could be used in a biased way that harms kids. The loose definition and application of consequences was identified by participants as “professional judgment” which was acknowledged as occurring at the teacher level (what is a behavior violation) and at the administrator (what is going to be the outcome). This closely mirrors the stated cause of disproportionality at two parts of the discipline process (Skiba, et al. 2014).

This inconsistency frequently appeared when administrators mentioned fights. There is inconsistency in how discipline is implemented depending, at times on, as one principal put it, “who hit first,” or “who was hit worse.” There was also a difference depending on the context of the words before there was fighting. One principal explained that asking students to walk away from someone who hit them “to find an adult” is a “foolish rule” that nobody would follow in the real world. That principal also noted that for lots of kids, words start the fight and “they can hurt for longer than a punch.”

### ***Laws/Policy Implementation***

As is mentioned in the introduction to this research work, policy is one of the levers used to manage many aspects of education including discipline. In all of the focus groups and individual interviews participants noted the role of laws and policies with respect to their decision making about exclusionary outcomes in discipline. As it relates to Loose Coupling Theory, policy and law are designed to bring consistency across the entire landscape for which it is written. Laws that relate to school-based discipline apply to all schools within the state that adopted them, and policies apply across all schools in that district.

Administrators, however, have inconsistent understanding of the laws related to discipline as well as the school district policies. This inconsistency creates practices which are loosely coupled despite the goal of a law and policy of creating tightly coupled practices. In the focus groups participants shared varied understandings of the most recent laws regarding suspensions. One participant noted “The law changed a few years ago, but I can’t remember the specific language” while another shared “there are the mandatory things, but I don’t know all of them,” and a third said “I know there is a law about suspending kids...there is a limit to using suspension” but none of those administrators identified the specific limitations or language of the law itself. Two administrators shared recent situations where the use of suspension hinged on how an aspect of the violation was entered into the data system. In one case, a student “could have been sent home on a mandatory suspension because of the rule about weapons” but instead became an opportunity to “work with the parents and the kid to get them help,



which a mandatory expulsion won't do." In another case, a student was being picked up from school by a parent and when the administrator escorted the student down the hall, the student passed a vape pen to another student which then was considered a drug distribution violation and resulted in an expulsion hearing. The principal indicated that "it was mandatory expulsion" and had the "student been able to regulate themselves" none of it would have happened. Those two instances demonstrate the way the process is still loosely coupled given the role of the administrator to determine what happened according to the descriptions in the discipline handbook, the district policy or even the law.

Similar to the laws regarding suspension and expulsion, there was inconsistent understanding of the various policies that related to sending students home. One administrator cited a policy that "a suspension of more than 2 days requires approval by my supervisor" but no other administrators in that same district knew of that policy. There was also a comment that while there is a "rule book" they are supposed to follow, one group of administrators noted with relief that they didn't have to follow the rule book "no matter what" and that there was "flexibility built in". Similarly, a participant noted there is room for professional judgment in the decision making.

An area that many participants indicated impacted their decision making was the role of the teacher contract and union power in telling principals "You have to suspend." Also mentioned in this area was how teachers were able to resist having students back in the classroom after disruptive behavior. Principals noted that the contract "forces discipline" when the teacher wants it to. Another participant noted that there is more

flexibility to use restorative processes, which a teacher can refuse to participate in if it involves them, “when it is peer to peer” because then the teacher doesn’t have a say in what happens.

Participants also noted that the contract protected the rights of union teachers to create and implement unwritten rules that created exclusions that were unrecorded. This was shared through the use of “buddy classrooms” where some students would spend substantial time out of their classroom, time outs in the hallway and what was called “soft” exclusion when a teacher would call home knowing the parent would come and pick the student up. One administrator called that action “trickery” and another felt that teachers “relied on parents thinking their student was suspended but it didn’t go through the office at all.”

One of the indicators in the responses that the discipline system was seen as loosely coupled was in response to a question asked in all the focus groups. After discussing a behavior scenario, participants were asked who they consult with when making discipline decisions. Nearly all participants indicated that they had other administrators they reached out to, but there was great variance in who. Some participants made all exclusion decisions with the other administrator in the school. Because the focus groups only contained principals, the other administrators were all assistant principals. For other participants who didn’t have another administrator in their school, or who did not align with their other administrator about discipline, they claimed to have a group of similarly situated peers who they reached out to. One participant described “I have some people in the district that I call. I need a thought partner. I forget

what is in my toolbox” and another agreed saying “I’m stressed out and I can’t keep track of what I know and don’t know.” When elaborating about how those networks were created, participants indicated that it happened organically by “finding smart people at a meeting and asking the right questions.” One participant noted that the creation of these networks in their district had gotten more difficult because there had previously been meetings with all the administrators that handled discipline to “get together and go through the handbook together to interpret it.”

Participants also shared about the role their own supervisor had in disciplinary decisions. In this area there was also great variance. Some participants felt that they “had to let my supervisor know if I was going to suspend someone” but another indicated that “some supervisors I have had wanted to know everything and others don’t want to know anything.” Participants also shared that “sometimes my supervisor doesn’t even know the law” and “it depends on who it is. This is the first year I have had a supervisor I trust as a thought partner and not a judge.” One participant shared “I haven’t had a supervisor that knows how my building operates or has any idea what we are doing.” Another indicated that they are “neither held accountable for sending kids home, nor celebrated when I don’t” by their supervisor. In addition to their direct supervisor, participants also noted they at times consulted with other district level administrators including special education administrators, student support administrators and other supervisors who they trust, and in one case the administrator relies on a teacher-leader in the school who they trust.

When looking at the ways the disciplinary system is coupled, it was clear that there are so many different places where the intended tightness of a policy, law or process gets implemented in a way that creates vast differences across schools, across districts and even within a single school. The looseness of the overall system, then, was frequently identified as a source of variance in disciplinary outcomes, and created the need for administrators to make decisions that they did not always agree with, or at times decisions based on a less than complete understanding of a policy or law. As was the case with Behaviorism, the tightness and looseness of the coupled system was at times protective for students to stay in class and school, and at times created the pathway for students to be sent home.

### **Critical Race Theory**

While the majority of administrators interviewed in the focus groups and then individual interviews articulated a reluctance to suspend students except in situations they felt it necessary, there was also an understanding that within their districts, state and the US as a whole there remains a disproportionate number of students of color that experience exclusionary outcomes. In the focus groups and individual interviews there was a focused question about race, but aspects of race and critical race theory appeared in other responses as well. As the responses were coded, any that mentioned race were coded for critical race theory, and they were then sorted into four categories based on recurring themes. The themes that appeared in the responses were the role of whiteness, the presence (and lack) of staff members of color, the role of historic racism, and the role of disciplinary practices in the community.

### *Role of Whiteness*

In all of the focus groups and individual interviews there was the recognition of whiteness and how discipline is a single aspect in a system that was designed by and for white people. Administrators mentioned that the school notion of “misbehavior” and expectations are “normed on white kids,” as are the disciplinary consequences or outcomes. At one school the administrator noted that their school had lots of privilege and so “lower level behaviors get elevated as a big deal.” Another administrator noted that they felt there would be less discipline events if the teachers would focus less on “controlling students and more on empowerment, but that is how whiteness works.” One administrator noted when Black boys are outgoing and creative it “is treated as problematic, they don’t fit into the culture of the teacher. We are trying to create conformity” which they later described as “dominant societal values.” One administrator described how one aspect of white culture was to talk about the “dangers of the neighborhood” the school was in. They noted a popular social media app “that perpetuates fear” and how the “safety seems to be the most important topic” but it is safety in a very “narrowly defined way, a white culture way.” This administrator also noted that in their school the parents were very open about needing to “protect themselves” in the neighborhood, but there was an expectation that students would not protect themselves if someone hit them. It was described as “the way a Black parent protects their kid is to tell them if somebody hits you, you better tear their ass up” but the school expectation is to tell an adult. When the expectations have been created around a white norm, and students of color have experienced the system in a way that has not

always supported them. An administrator characterized it as “Little Black boys say I'm going to handle this. You hit me, I'm not deferring my action and I'm not putting the action in the hands of a teacher who won't believe me anyway.” One participant noted “our desire to have a book with a list of consequences is the role and presence of whiteness,” and another noted that “restorative work, which is in many ways opposed to whiteness, is never going to come from a big reference book or toolkit.” One administrator acknowledged that at a school with a mostly white population, the consequences wanted by the families were “different if a kid wasn't part of the group.” When asked about the group, the administrator said race was one indicator of who wasn't in the group.

### ***Staff of Color***

One of the most often talked about strategies in schools to support students of color is to hire and retain staff of color to the levels that match the demographics of the students. Throughout the focus groups and individual interviews, the role of staff of color, and their presence or lack, was mentioned. Beyond the counting of staff of color, however, the participants mentioned other ways staffing and race impact the disciplinary process.

One early acknowledgement was that the staffing process in many districts creates inequalities for schools. Using seniority as a primary retention tool, differing processes for internal and external hiring, transfers between schools and the reality of social isolation for teachers of color were all mentioned. Additionally, it was noted that the system has mismatches between students and teachers and one administrator said: “I

think about the kid that doesn't have a strong relationship with the teacher, especially if there is a pattern with other students of color." One participant shared that "it also brings up the role of colleagues of color who then have to do the work the white teacher is supposed to do." Administrators noted that one of the persistent challenges with staff is that not all staff are ready to have conversations about race and their own biases. One administrator noted "in my school we didn't have a culture in which teachers were willing to delve into issues of race and culture." Another administrator responded that they "had to shift staffing over time to build the skill of our equity work."

The participants also shared that the racialized dynamics were only present within the teacher population or between teachers and students. Nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the participants in the focus groups and individual interviews were administrators of color and race was mentioned in the work they do with regard to discipline as well.

Many of the administrators acknowledged their own race and its impact on discipline with comments like "As a white administrator with a mostly non-white school, I have to be explicit about decisions" and "I racialize all of it. I am a white dude." One white administrator noted "administrators of color have authority, but also a responsibility and autonomy to be in compliance with unwritten codes" and an administrator of color shared "as an administrator of color, it's a double negative and I am constantly navigating those identities." Both white administrators and administrators of color mentioned the way their own racial identity factored into the decision-making process and what is communicated after a disciplinary decision is made. One administrator described it as "I want to be explicit about my centering kids of color, but I

don't want to be an annoying equity warrior who talks about it all the time" while an administrator of color shared that they were always seen through the lens of race, "everything has to do with race, everything. Every decision I make is viewed differently because I am [an administrator of color]."

### *History of Racism*

One of the aspects of critical race theory that was present in the interviews and focus groups was the impact of historic racism on the current practices of the schools and the communities they exist within. As Brooks and Watson (2019) explore in their essay on racism in schools, "historic racism is impacted by and impacts school leadership" (p. 633). The administrators were able to identify a number of situations and areas regarding discipline where racism underpins the actions and outcomes.

One aspect that was mentioned was the desire by administrators to allow for their school to be corrective to the historic role schools in general or their specific school had with respect to race and racism. One administrator characterized it as "historic elements of racism, classism and inequity lead us to support students" while another relayed a story about a white teacher who was making assumptions about students based on racialized bias. The administrator noted "there is a tendency to look at [race] through a lens of dysfunction and deficits" and also shared that their teachers "are experts on kids, but they know nothing about their culture or who they are except it is negative." The negative view of students of color by teachers is attributed, by one administrator, to "we have a racial lens, and an equity policy but we permit ongoing harm by our lack of focus on it." Another administrator indicated the challenge of systemic racism in discipline



because “I don’t think anybody who goes into schools is trying to contribute to the school to prison pipeline” but then the rates of suspension have not gone down.

### ***Discipline Role in Community***

A final aspect of discipline with respect to race and Critical Race Theory that emerged from the focus groups and individual interviews is the relationship between disciplinary outcomes and the values and beliefs in the community. The administrators that had articulated that they shifted the culture at their school from one that had lots of exclusions to one that didn’t mention that they had to deal with the expectations of the community as well. One school leader explained that their way of reducing disproportionate exclusions was to take exclusions off the table for all students. This “removed biased outcomes because we took that outcome away.” When asked how the community felt about it, the administrator shared that the main pushback was from a Black parent who wanted their student suspended. It was resolved through a series of meetings and deepening of the relationship. Other administrators also found the community value around suspension played a role in the decision-making process. At one school, there was an expectation that fights would result in suspension, but the administrator discovered the families “expected their student to be suspended, but they didn’t want it. They just assumed it would happen.” This same administrator shared that the community value at that school was “if someone hits you, hit them back and hit them back hard!” which the administrator acknowledged “it is a natural consequence that when you hit someone they may turn and hit you harder.”

Critical Race Theory emerged as an important dimension through which decisions were filtered. What emerged through the second phase of coding was a recognition that while race was acknowledged throughout the responses, like the other framework concepts, Critical Race Theory was described in ways that were both protective for students to remain in school and the basis for exclusions.

### **Complexity Theory**

The final framework through which the data was viewed and then coded was through complexity theory. As mentioned in earlier sections of this work, Complexity Theory describes the phenomena of an organization that is more complex in its workings than can be understood by looking at any part in isolation (Kaplan & Owings, 2017). Schools are excellent examples of complex organizations because they are concerned with and impacted by curriculum, teaching practices, policies, relationships between students and teachers, teachers and administrators, parents and schools as well as a host of other issues including accountability at the state and national level. They are frequently the center of a web of issues that are not clearly or firmly within the scope of the schooling mandate—issues like mental health, political activism, and social emotional wellbeing. One of the concerns this study hoped to understand was how one of the systems, the discipline system, worked within the context of complexity.

Items were coded under the Complexity framework if there was either the mention of the intersection of multiple relationships (teacher/student, teacher/parent for example) or the mention of the role of context. The context appeared in the responses from both the field groups and individual interviews as a function of relationships, issues

that are not directly related to discipline, but get handled as disciplinary, and the way that complex organizations force leaders to manage competing resources including time, staffing and spaces.

### ***Relationship Complexity***

One of the complexities in the discipline process has to do with the various relationships that exist within a school. In a school setting, there are students, who interact with each other, teachers and other staff, administrators, who also may interact with each other as well as with the students. Frequently, during disciplinary events many of those groups are put into conflict and one of the complex concepts is navigating the differences. During the focus groups, one principal mentioned “there are multiple types of conflict: Peer to Peer, Student to Teacher” and another added how the discipline process always involves complex relationships because beyond the actual conflict, which always involves students, the referral process “is about the adults.” In the focus groups, one of the questions was sharing a scenario about a discipline situation and asking administrators how they would respond and what information they needed to make decisions. In all of the focus groups, the participants brought up how the relationship between the teacher and the student has an impact on the student either returning to class or being excluded. This dynamic is further complicated by the relationship between the administrator and the teacher. Two examples of similar comments are “I need to know what is happening for the teacher” and “I will talk to the class about what happened, but also I need to talk to the teacher.” In another focus group, it was noted that the administrator needed to “check in with the teacher before the kid comes back.” Another

shared that they need to know “is the teacher ready to and available to support the kid.” Another phrased it as “it depends on the kid being ready, and the teacher being ready.” The participants shared that they are aware of the importance of the teacher-student dynamic in keeping students in class and returning them quickly to the learning environment, and that a teacher who doesn’t want, or isn’t ready to have the student back in class is not going to be good for the student if they are returned. One principal shared that they know “when a teacher is at her wits end...and that environment is an unhealthy place for that kid.”

Beyond the sometimes stressed relationship between students and their teachers, the participants shared that discipline decisions are also impacted by the relationship the administrator has with the teachers. In one individual interview, a principal shared that “it was really a focus on the teacher, when the kid should be central. I’m often being pulled to coddle a teacher versus being here for kids.” That same idea that the focus shifts from the student to the teacher was present in all of the focus groups. In response to another’s comment about talking to teachers about their role in students feeling welcome, one participant noted “you have to have relationships with the teacher to call them out.” Another noted they have tried to build the capacity for teachers to call themselves out, or “hold each other accountable.” The same administrator noted that work couldn’t happen until they were at the school long enough to build relationships with teachers. One administrator noted “I feel pressure to keep the kid out of school if the teacher is not in a good space.” In addition, several respondents mentioned the role the teacher contract has in this decision making. One participant shared “the teacher has the right to refuse letting

the student come back to their class.” -Another shared that they have had teachers “exercise that part of the contract to move the kid” from their classroom.

There are also, however, external relationships that impact how discipline functions in a school. One of the first action steps described in the focus groups’ response to the behavior scenario was to involve the families of the students in the class. The responses, however, indicated another layer of complexity because not all families have the same reaction to the school disciplinary process. One participant noted the importance of “communicating with the families of the kid who was throwing things, but also all the other kids in the class” and other participants indicated that those calls are not always straightforward. One shared “when I call, I need to be prepared to offer something about what we are going to do. I can’t call over there and say we don’t know what to do, even when we don’t know.” In one individual interview, the relationship was described as “we have a student, but it’s not just a student, it’s a family.” That administrator went on to describe enlisting the support of the family by sharing that “this is not to get your student out of the building, but we are going to look at what else we need to do.” Some parents and families are supportive of the discipline process in the school, but there are others that are not. One principal shared “the parent doesn’t think their kid started it, so it isn’t their fault” and shouldn’t have any disciplinary consequences, while in another case, the principal shared they “suspend the family” by having them come into the school and sit with and support the student. When asked to elaborate by other members of the focus group, this administrator shared that not all

families could do it (scheduling, work, etc.) but it had a positive impact for the kids and staff when they could.

In addition to the relationship between the parents of the student with the behaviors and the school, participants also shared the complex relationship created with the parents/families of the students impacted by the behaviors. In the case of a specific student being hit, one participant shared “other parents want to know what is happening, but I have to honor the privacy.” Another noted “the parents wanted the kid kicked out of school but they don’t know all the details.” In that same example, the participant shared how complex the relationships at a school are because “the teachers are mostly afraid of the parents, and didn’t know how far an angry parent would go, so teachers were sharing more than they should have about the kid that had been acting out.” This level of relationship complexity is a strong example of how difficult decision making can be when the teacher, student, family and administrator all have unique relationships with every other member involved in the conflict.

The final aspect of relational complexity revealed in the focus groups and interviews is the role of the general community in discipline decision making. Participants shared that even when their own students are not involved in a conflict directly, there are pressures exerted by the real and perceived voice of the community. One participant shared that “the parents all talk, people talk. And all of a sudden, they want all these kids kicked out of our school” and another shared “parents in different grades, different classes are asking me why wasn’t that kid suspended, or why isn’t that kid out?” One administrator shared how difficult it can be to navigate the narrative about

a school when there is an incident that happens within sight of the school community. They shared that there was a big screaming fight at a community event that turned into a physical fight. In the days following the principal shared “folks wanted to see that something had happened, which really meant they wanted to see that somebody was gone from school.” This same administrator shared a concept that is at the core of this research project when they asked “is [removing them] really for the kid or is it for the community of people who you feel pressure from? What are they learning from being kicked out of school?” Addressing the needs of the student, the teachers, the parents, the community and the administrator at the same time is an obviously complex problem.

### ***Context Complexity***

During all the focus groups the respondents frequently identified the context of a situation when describing either the event or the outcomes. When asked how they would respond to a behavioral scenario, in all of the focus groups respondents asked questions about the students’ basic needs. Questions asked were “is the kid hungry,” “did they sleep last night,” “what is the home life like,” all factored into the conversation about how the principal would respond to a behavioral concern. There was a recognition that students who were hungry, tired, stressed out, scared or missing other basic needs are more likely to have a behavioral need as well. Viewing the behavior through the lens of context allowed the administrators to consider how the context impacts the situation. One administrator shared “when kids act out, they aren’t acting out to make you mad, they’re acting out because they need something or something isn’t being met at home.” Another administrator shared that the context is important because “there is probably more than

what just happened going on.” This perspective was shared by other administrators who added “when I get called to the classroom, I almost always know which teacher and which kid.” They further explained “some of our kids don’t come to school with full bellies, or shoes that fit, or nights that are for sleeping.”

In addition to recognizing the impact of students not having their basic needs met at the moment, the administrator participants also noted the role of lagging or missing skills in academic and social emotional regulation as contributing to disciplinary incidents and outcomes. When asked to introduce themselves as the first question in the focus group, in every focus group members identified themselves, their school and offered other contextual information that was not specifically prompted. Participants shared that their school, for instance, was a language immersion school, had a behavior support classroom, had a special education autism support classroom or had a specific focus that families and students had to choose to join. During the focus groups, the specific contexts did not emerge as the answer to any specific question, but participants shared that “discipline depends on the context of the kid—maybe they have lagging skills.” Another shared that when considering behaviors, “the timeline is kid based and includes lots of factors” including the factors of the school itself.

### ***Competing Resources***

As discussed in the section on Loose Coupling, there is a strong belief among participants that staffing is one of the important factors impacting the decision-making process about exclusionary discipline. Participants noted that they either didn’t “have the staff” to continue to support some students at school, or those staff were needed in other



capacities. In the coupling section, those concerns were coded because of their role in making staffing decisions—which staff members to hire and with what roles.

Additionally, participants noted the complex demands disciplinary incidents place on time of the administrator, other staff and even spaces in the school setting.

Administrators are expected to complete a wide array of responsibilities in their daily work as well as manage long-term goals and projects. Everything from the operation of the school facility to the instructional program, to public relations, supervision of staff and management of students are all within the scope of the building principal. One participant explained it as “I’m supposed to be an instructional leader, and I’m supposed to be working with families, and there’s all these other things I have on my plate.” Another shared that discipline is “really time consuming.” One administrator acknowledged that disciplinary decisions are at times made with an understanding of what is left to do in the day. They noted “it depends on the time of day because of the resources and the amount of time left to supervise the student.” This same idea surfaced in an individual interview when describing a student who had started the day with loud disruptive behaviors. The administrator shared they had to weigh the cost to their staff of working with this student for the next 6 hours. They described it as “I had to make the decision we can't continue to have multiple adults work with this kid for the rest of the day. We went ahead and said, we're going to have you go home.” That decision was not in line with the principal’s ideas about discipline or student support, but was a practical solution to the resource shortage of time and staff.

In addition to the time taken up during discipline incidents and their aftermath, administrators also shared that there is a limited amount of time with teachers and staff outside of the student incident dynamic. One participant shared that reducing exclusions is “always an intentional goal in my school improvement plan, but it isn’t as clear how my goals are supported by the district’s trainings.” Another participant shared that there is limited time for their own professional development and, at times, such professional development sessions are “being run by people who have never been principals. It’s like they are scared to put us in a room to dialogue.” Yet another participant noted “if we are going to actually build capacity to meet kids where they are, we need training.” The need to balance professional development across instruction, discipline, relationship building, social emotional lessons, and parent outreach among other issues underscores the difficulty of working on any of them at all.

Beyond time, there was also mention of the role of spaces in a school as a contributing factor to exclusionary discipline decision making. One administrator described an area in their school that was a “cool down” room that was staffed, while another shared that they “don’t have the space” to keep kids at school. At one school there is a sensory course that students can use to regulate themselves, but other participants indicated they had no rooms in their buildings or if they had a room, there were no staff to supervise it. Participants shared the complex interplay between spaces, staffing and supporting student behavior as potential avenues to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices in their schools.

### ***Complex Role of Discipline***

The final area that responses were coded for in Complexity Theory pertained to the complex role discipline has with respect to other systems and student concerns. What makes these responses align with complexity theory is they expose that the school context over-identifies multiple issues as discipline because there aren't other response pathways available.

During the focus groups, respondents identified places where they used the disciplinary process because there wasn't another choice, but discipline was not fully appropriate. This idea emerged from the administrators wanting to know if the student in the behavior scenario was hungry, tired, or stressed out. One participant shared that "mental health concerns and trauma impact were treated as discipline" but that there "needs to be a deeper response" option. One participant noted "we are mental health providers." Another shared that some parents kept their kids home for "mental health days," but others "have to send their kids to school no matter what they are feeling." One participant shared the perspective that there is a "need for a social worker to get involved because there's some systemic stuff going on in the family. There's lack of food or lack of supervision in the home." One administrator noted that "our reaction to student behavior is also a symptom of what we are dealing with as a system" and that "we have to break down this single idea of how we do school." Another responded in agreement by adding "discipline is a blanket thrown over all this other stuff in education." The participants used the metaphor of exclusionary discipline as a "tool" and then noted they use it "when other tools have been exhausted" and "there needs to be a better tool." The idea that discipline is the primary system available, even when not completely aligned with the

situation was revealed in one participant's comment that they “sometimes send a kid home because our school is the toxin, they need a break from us.”

Even though it was clear throughout the focus groups and individual interviews that participants primarily felt exclusionary discipline was used when there was a lack of other options, resources, or time, there was one consistent idea that positioned suspension as a tool of advocacy for students. There were participants that described students who were suspended as a way to highlight a specific student or behavior. As one administrator put it, it was to “get the district to pay attention to a kid.” When asked for more explanation, the administrator described a dynamic between the school’s resources and the role of other district level departments having the ability to activate additional support. In one case it was the “SpEd department needs to see severe behaviors and our severe response”; and another principal shared “maybe the level of support we can offer isn’t what is needed, but there isn’t another way to get supports.” This idea was also shared in an individual interview while discussing a student who had mental health needs, but was only able to get increased service through the discipline process. In this case the administrator shared that “suspension is advocacy, as a tool to demonstrate a need for support.”

### **Overview of Findings**

The process described above, that included gathering data and coding through 2 sequential coding processes, resulted in the four by four matrix shared in Chapter 3, to attempt to understand the various ways to see the decision making process that leads to exclusionary discipline or avoids exclusions. Looking at the responses from the focus

groups and individual interviews through four different theoretical lenses, then further identifying 4 themes that emerged through each of the lenses revealed the challenge at the core of disciplinary decision making. The interviews showed that while behaviorism is frequently a part of the process of discipline, it is rarely the only aspect that matters. Similarly, each of the four theoretical approaches only reveals a part of the overall process. The lens that most fully and accurately describes discipline decision making is Complexity Theory. The process of understanding and organizing the data showed how looking at any one part of the process does not adequately understand the rest—which is the definition of Complexity Theory.

In order to best illustrate this, an example of a single disciplinary experience, as described by one of the participants, is instructive. For this example, because it involves a single administrator and a single story, I will assign them a fictional name and identity. This administrator, Laura, is an experienced principal at an urban elementary school in a larger district in the Northwest. The discipline experience for her student began with a morning check-in with the assistant principal, which is a part of the in place behavior support plan. Principal Laura shared “we knew she was amped up, and the AP said, here are the expectations for the day.” Within the first hour and a half the student was “out of the classroom at least three times, had walked into different classrooms to disrupt them, sat in the hallway, was not listening to any adult redirection.” According to Principal Laura, this continued into the next hour and the student was told the school “needed to make a phone call home.” The parent was told her student was struggling and may need some support, maybe Mom could talk to her.” The student did not calm down, but

instead escalated to “calling the AP all sorts of names, inappropriate names in the hallway, still refusing to go to the classroom.” The principal describes ongoing escalation and notes “all the tools we usually use aren’t working” and she decides “we’ve spent 2 and a half hours trying to get this student to calm down and it isn’t working.” She recalls making the decision “we can’t continue to have multiple adults work with this one kid the rest of the day, so she had to go home. ½ day suspension.” The school calls the parent, “who isn’t happy, but works with us and comes to school.” In the process of picking up the student’s backpack to go home, there is visible drug paraphernalia sticking out of the bag. The principal describes the events that next unfold, “so then we have to deal with that [drug paraphernalia], right, and then we see her hand something off to another student. We find out its a vape pen.” The principal explains that now the student is up for expulsion because of the board policy on “transfer of drugs.”

It is useful to look at this specific instance through the theoretical lenses outlined in the study. From a behaviorist lens, there was a behavior support plan with planned breaks, earned breaks, clearly articulated expectations, and a consequence for being in the hallway and disrupting the classes (increased adult attention). Additionally, there was an acknowledgement that the previously successful approaches to de-escalate the student were not working at that moment. So, while the behaviorist lens helps understand how the school is responding, that alone is inadequate to understand what happened.

In the description of the student, Principal Laura noted the student is bi-racial, and comes from a family that has had a number of students come through the school over the years. She described it as “it’s not just a student, it’s a family.” At a school with a mostly

white staff, the principal wonders “are there things the teachers could shift? Is that one of the reasons she is blowing out?” This student exists at the intersection of the mismatch between the racialized identity of the students in schools and the racialized identity of the staff, including the administration. Seeing this example through a lens of critical race theory would highlight the presence of whiteness in the entire educational system, as well as in the behaviorist model itself. The concept that all experience is racialized and practices are racially biased surfaced through Critical Race Theory and applies here. This student, who is bi-racial is operating in a system that has normed behavior expectations on compliance and white, middle-class values. Because Principal Laura is also white, the racialized aspect of this experience is not mentioned except at the beginning. There is also, unmentioned in the narrative, the racialized role that drug policy exists within, and the school district policy that puts an increased consequence on “transfer” irrespective of the danger or seriousness of the item transferred. It goes unexamined, for instance that the transfer of a “vape pen” is expellable but the possession of more dangerous drugs would not be.

However, Critical Race Theory is also not adequate to understand the disciplinary decision making or the outcome. Using the lens of Loose Coupled Theory, Principal Laura exercised substantial latitude in how she and her staff responded to the initial student behavior. There is a threshold crossed at the 2 ½ hour mark that Principal Laura notes “At that point I had to make a decision.” The principal is making decisions throughout the entire process, but the decision to exclude the student comes at a seemingly arbitrary time. Additionally, in the discussion about this student, Principal

Laura notes she was thinking about “how do we get this student the support she needs” which indicates there isn’t a clearly tight process to activate student support.

Additionally, when the student passed the vape pen to another student, the principal indicated “I was so mad when we found that out, because we were just going to do drug and alcohol. Then I found out the transfer happened and it upped the ante and we *have* to go into expulsion. (emphasis added).” Seeing how the discipline process is at times guided by adherence to rules and policy, but at other times guided by context and individualization reveals that Loose Coupled Theory is also inadequate to understand the disciplinary process.

What remains, then, is a disciplinary action by a school on a student who was living at the intersection of a nest of complex issues, actions and concepts. For the administrator there was clearly a desire to keep the student in class, and keep the student in school. They had a robust plan, and leveraged human resources to attempt to meet the unmet needs of the student. There was a relationship with the student, her family, the teachers and the other staff that all weighed on the decision to send her home. The administrator was attempting to balance the needs of this student against the other students in the school by considering the other work the adults needed to do, while at the same time trying to ease the difficulty of picking up the student for the parent. When asked about the final outcome, Principal Laura indicated that the student was out of school for one extra day because the parent didn’t want her to come to school right away, but was back the day after and Principal Laura wondered “what is going to change? Nothing. The [behavior] coach gets to be really in with that student for a day and we are



taking data because we have got to figure it out.” This one student incident at one school on one day shows the complex context school leaders describe when trying to understand how best to support students staying in the classroom.

The findings in this study reveal a disciplinary system that forces school staff to interact with a huge range of issues and concepts: behaviorist theory, critical race, organizational coupling, and the complex intersection of all of them. Administrators are asked to make decisions that impact students, families, staff and the school community while attempting to balance the competing needs of all the groups. What is best for one part of the process may not be best for others. What the responses reveal is that discipline is too complex to be solved by a policy shift, a law revision or even a well-intentioned leader.

## **Chapter 5 Conclusions and Implications**

One of the ongoing problems schools and school systems encounter is the consistent use of exclusionary discipline practices, suspensions and expulsions, for young students. (Losen, 2013; ; Skiba, et al., 2011; Williams, 2017) Despite national attention to this problem, exclusionary outcomes impact black and brown boys at a rate significantly higher than their white peers, even for the same offenses (Mendoza, et al., 2020; Skiba, et al., 2014; Townsend, 2000). Despite a substantial research base that demonstrates the importance of consistent attendance for all students (Christie, 2007; Gottfried, 2010), and despite the continual modification of school board policies and laws restricting the use of exclusionary discipline for young students, the problem has not lessened. In fact, in Oregon, the location of this study, the problem has gotten worse since the enactment of the most recent update in the law, Senate Bill 553 in 2015, to limit the use of suspension and expulsion for students grade 5 and younger. (ODE, 2016).

In Chapter 4 I analyzed and categorized the data learned from conducting focus group interviews and follow up individual interviews with regards to exclusionary outcomes and administrator decision making. In this chapter I will synthesize the data, share the implications for the larger school system context and consider further study that will continue this work.

While it is still a common practice, the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline have been well studied and documented. Perhaps the most compelling reason to reconsider exclusionary discipline is that it does not work to change student behavior. For students that get behavior referrals, exclusionary approaches do not stop their future

misbehavior. Iselin (2010) shared that students who experience exclusionary discipline are more likely to have repeated exclusions and are more likely to have interaction with Juvenile Justice. Massar (2015) examined referral data at the middle school level and found that over 50% of students who were suspended early in the school year received another suspension during that year. In addition to exclusion not changing the behaviors, exclusion is correlated to many other negative impacts for the student. Skiba (2014) has shown that students with even one exclusion are at increased risk of drop out, credit deficiency, repeated exclusions, expulsion and lower overall academic achievement. One of the justifications for suspension and expulsion is that it provides a better learning environment for the “other kids” in the classroom and school. However, in a study of the effect on non-suspended peers, Lacoé and Steinberg (2018) found that removal of students with classroom behaviors decreased the overall academic achievement of the non removed peers and increased the absence rate. They suggest “the avoidance effect may reflect that peers, observing punitive practices in their schools, may feel less safe or welcome in the school leading them to stay home more frequently” (Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018). It is also well studied that exclusionary discipline is used disproportionately on students of color even for the same offenses as their white peers (Skiba, et al., 2016)

Knowing the harmful impact of exclusionary discipline practices on all students, along with the policy and legal limits placed on school practices, this study sought to understand the various pressures that administrators in K-5 and K-8 school settings felt when responding to events that resulted in disciplinary consequences for students. The primary research question that guided this study was: How do Administrators in the

Northwest describe their rationale for using exclusionary discipline practices.

Additionally, there were 2 secondary questions:

1. What are the factors used to decide when to use exclusionary discipline?
2. What are the factors used to decide when not to use exclusionary discipline?

In order to answer the research questions, I conducted a two-step process that included 3 focus groups, with 5 members in each, followed by 4 individual interviews for participants that shared unique perspectives, or had specific situations that required deeper understanding. The focus groups were conducted with sitting principals in K-5 or K-8 settings. The participants were purposefully chosen in order to satisfy the qualifying conditions of school configuration, location, and length of service. Additionally, the participants were chosen and grouped in order to create groups that would most likely provide robust discussion. In forming the groups I purposefully balanced school configuration; school characteristics, including poverty level and diversity of the student body; and gender and racial identity of the administrators in order to avoid isolating dimensions for individual participants (Morgan, 2019). In all, I interviewed 15 principals in focus group format and 4 in individual follow up interviews.

Focus groups and individual interviews were coded using a two-step coding process. The first was a framework analysis where interview transcripts were viewed through 4 distinct theoretical frameworks: Behaviorism, Loose Coupling Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Complexity Theory. As responses were placed within the framework matrix after each focus group, I was able to determine when saturation had occurred. By the conclusion of the third focus group, there were no additional unique codes identified.

The second phase of coding was an open, emergent method where the compiled responses in each framework were further coded to understand themes and concepts. Through that process, each of the frameworks was further organized into 4 themes making a total of 16 specific thematic concepts that helped understand the findings (See Figure 5.)

As summarized in Chapter 4, there were significant aspects of decision making that fit within the theoretical frameworks identified above. The data indicated that administrators' decision-making reflected characteristics of all four decision making models identified in the research literature and that each lens provided an informative pathway for understanding the setting and dynamics of the decision. When considering how best to handle disciplinary incidents, the responses suggest that administrators are frequently using a behaviorist model<sup>3</sup>, thinking about what rewards and consequences will impact the behavior of students. It is also clear that they are considering the implications of race and racial dynamics between the students, teachers, themselves as leaders and the families. In addition, the administrators shared examples that revealed that the degree to which the local school possessed characteristics of a tightly coupled organization (strongly consistent with district and state requirements) or a loosely coupled organization (focused on local school flexibility that varied from strict compliance) impacted the discipline decisions of the administrator.<sup>4</sup> What emerged, however, as the most compelling understanding of the factors administrators use to make

---

<sup>3</sup> See Zhou, et al., 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See Orton & Weick, 1990.

exclusionary discipline decisions resonates most clearly with Complexity Theory. As I shared in the final example of Chapter four, the types of incidents that can result in a suspension or expulsion are entangled in all the aspects of the other three frameworks simultaneously, which aligns with the conditions Complexity Theory defines, where any one aspect of the complex system, when viewed in isolation, does not reveal a comprehensive explanation of the system itself. In this study, discipline is one aspect of school organization that is entangled in nearly all aspects of the entire system.

Academics impact behavior, relationships impact behavior, racial experience impacts behavior and there is not always a clear and consistent relationship between behavior and discipline. This finding will be discussed in the next section more fully.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

The focus for this study came from my own experience as a Principal in both K-8 and K-5 settings working to reduce the number of exclusionary outcomes for discipline in my own schools. While I was able to impact the experience of the students in my own school, I was confronted with the reality that as a system, at the district level and state level, exclusionary outcomes were increasing and remaining disproportional. I began this study trying to understand what was happening for school administrators that perpetuated the outcomes that were frequently cited, discussed and addressed.

The application of the theoretical frameworks was based on an exploration of the existing studies about discipline and exclusions. Researchers like Skiba, Losen, Burke and others had established how pervasive exclusionary discipline was, in terms of the total number of students impacted, as well as, the various demographic markers including

grade, race, disability, language and school configuration. By also looking at the type of violation and the outcome, it is well established that different students receive different outcomes even for the same offense.

This study attempted to understand what pressures, influences and factors went into the decision-making process. What emerged is an understanding of the way that student discipline exists at the center of a nest of issues, both school-based and external to the school, that make each decision contextual and resistant to technical solutions. When a student acts in a way that is outside of expectations, the organization must respond. However, this study demonstrates that the response is inconsistent for different students because so many differing and possibly competing issues are simultaneously operating.

Participants noted that behavior support plans are an essential aspect of supporting students in schools. These plans typically reflect a behaviorist model format of specific expectations, rewards and consequences, and supportive interventions. However, behavior plans themselves do not affect behavior. The school must have the capacity to implement the plan with fidelity, but implementation of behavior support is difficult for each teacher tasked with any aspect of implementation. As one participant shared, "I know it is the teacher that sets the kid off every time." That specific teacher is unlikely to implement a behavior support plan that will not "fix" the student immediately. In a perverse way, the teacher not implementing the plan will be rewarded because the student will continue to be removed for inappropriate behaviors. This is not to say that Behavior Support Plans are not an important tool schools should use to work with

students, but behaviorist thinking will only work some of the time for some of the situations.

According to a study that looked at perceptions of disciplinary incidents through the student and teacher lens, Hernandez-Sheets found that the staff predominantly viewed discipline as a linear process that flowed from action to consequence, while the students from the same study viewed discipline as a cyclical and recursive series of actions and reactions (Hernandez-Sheets, 1996). The staff view of discipline aligns with a behaviorist model seeking to identify the antecedent, the function and the consequence of an isolated behavioral action. Students, however, were more inclined to consider the context of the entire situation beyond the boundaries of what was visible in the moment of the incident.

Similarly when considering the role of policies and rules, the participants shared a range of experiences about how tightly their schools were coupled to district policies and practices. They also shared that there is variance within schools, exposing a loosely coupled system that creates opportunities for inconsistency at all levels of the disciplinary process. The revision of policy and law implies that by creating more tightly coupled systems the exclusionary discipline problems will be solved. However, the respondents found the structures for coupling to be, at times, restrictive, forcing an exclusionary outcome that was not warranted. At other times loose coupling allowed for discretion to manifest as bias. While policy and law are an important aspect of the discipline process, the limitations of reliance on policy are profound. For policy to work to reduce exclusionary discipline there would need to be more clarity and shared understanding



about the policy itself. In this research project there were administrators that were able to reference “a policy” and “the new law” but did not have a consistent understanding of the parameters, definitions and applications that impacted their role. The intent of the narrowing of the discipline law in Oregon (ORS 339.250) may have been to reduce exclusions, but the impact has been the opposite. This is strong evidence that policy alone is unable to shift the practice of excluding students.

Similar variability in responses was noted in the findings about Critical Race Theory. Principal interviews revealed that when asked explicitly about race, the principals shared how race impacts their thinking. However, the scarcity of explicit racialized responses reveals that even in districts that have dedicated substantial time and energy to racial equity policies and trainings, that strategy alone will not substantially impact the decision making about exclusionary practices. When asked specifically about examples of exclusionary discipline, the participants that spoke of individual students all discussed students of color. This taken alongside the ongoing persistent data at the state and national level reveal racial bias continues to play a role in exclusionary discipline, but not the only role.

What the findings revealed is that all of the aspects described above are operating at the same time and within the same incident. The principal is asked to weigh all of the various aspects, relationships, policies, and outcomes against each other and arrive at a decision that subordinates one or more competing issues to others. In addition to the responses that fit within the original theoretic frameworks, there were additional findings that while didn't fit neatly into one of the four theoretic frames do contribute the overall

concept that a school is a complex organization with many dependent issues and aspects that interact with each other in ways that are unpredictable. In one focus group, a member noted they work at a school that is a school of choice—which is to say there is no assignment neighborhood, but all students have to apply and win admittance. This context, while not explicitly within one of the frameworks, adds a layer of complexity in decision making. Similarly, other administrators described their schools as having “special education classrooms” which again impacts the overall climate of the school and response to behaviors as well as the frequency and severity of the behaviors. There were also instances where administrators acknowledged that the system of education, with the number of students in a classroom, the number of adults in a class or school also contributes to the ways that discipline becomes the catch-all for all issues students and teachers deal with. Undoing the basic school structure isn’t necessarily a part of the frameworks, but it is also an important part of how administrators weigh decisions.

As I did at the end of Chapter 4, it may be instructive to share a single example that will illustrate the complexity of decision making. One principal described a situation where there was a student-to-student physical altercation. Without additional information, this could be relatively straightforward. Because the discipline process in this principal’s district is loosely coupled, there is a range of possible responses to a fight, including suspension. There are also options for other responses, including restorative practices, safety plans, and ways to ensure the students don’t interact with each other.

This situation, however, happened during an event at the school, so there was a public presence. The principal described family members who believed “you can’t have

these kids back and their parents to a big celebration a day after they've just been seen fighting throughout the building” clearly calling for the students to be suspended. The “big celebration” mentioned was the promotion to the next school level at the end of the final week of school. The principal then had to consider the impact of timing on this situation. The principal identified that had the fight happened early in the year, the “promotion celebration would never have been removed for these kids.” Because the fight was seen by families and teachers, there was increased pressure on the principal to “do something” and make that visible to the community. Similarly, there were teachers that also wanted the students to miss the promotion ceremony. The principal shared that one teacher indicated “I'm going to tell you how it's going to go, because I lead this or that or I was in that room I held the door open and it could have been me.”

It is clear from this example that the principal is navigating a situation that has clear behaviorist aspects. The removal of the promotion ceremony, for instance, is a negative punishment designed to shift the student behavior away from fighting. At the same time, however, is the ability in a loosely coupled organization to allow the student to attend the ceremony, but remove a different aspect of the celebration, maintaining the negative punishment. The context in this case matters because the incident was public, so teachers and families who saw the fight want to also see the outcome. However, because of privacy laws, the outcome of discipline is not shared publicly. This seemingly simple event, a fight, is complex precisely because in a complex organization multiple parts of the system are in constant interplay and cannot be pulled apart.

### **Situated in larger context**

As previously noted, there are studies that establish the frequency of exclusionary discipline (Losen, 2013; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Skiba, 2004; Skiba et. al, 2014;), and studies that have established the reality of disproportionality in outcomes, (Losen and Gillespie, 2012; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Additionally, there are studies that have looked at the role of secondary principals in the discipline process (Nelson, 2016; Tookes, 2017, Theoharis, 2008) but there are few studies that have conducted studies in the elementary schools or who have tried to understand what is causing the increasing use of exclusionary discipline in the youngest grades. This study adds to the ongoing conversation by its focus on elementary school principals and its attempt to understand the pressures placed on administrators that may lead to or avoid the use of exclusionary discipline practices.

From a methodological perspective, the majority of studies involving discipline are quantitative analyses of existing discipline data, trying to understand the various correlations that occur ( Burke & Nishioka, 2014; Skiba, 2004; Sugai & Horner, 2002). The few qualitative studies that involved principal experience focused on individual interviews and survey responses and participants were high school administrators (Henry-Hogarth, 2018; Nelson, 2016, Skiba, 2014). This study employed focus groups sequentially before individual interviews (Pederson, et.al 2016) and the use of focus groups in education (Jarrell, 2000; Morgan, 2019).

### **Limitations**

While there is valuable information discovered in this study, there are also limitations. The small participant group size limits the overall amount of data. There

were 3 groups of 5 participants, a total participant number of 15, from which the individual interviews were selected. The small number of participants limited the ability for each focus group to have a complete mix of gender, race, ethnicity, experience level and school configuration in each focus group. The small participant size limited the possible perspectives that were shared. Similarly, the time constraint of the groups limited the responses and the discussion that is possible in a longer session. Individual interviewees were selected because of their unique perspectives or comments made in the focus groups. It is a limitation to have not interviewed all participants individually, as there are possible perspective that were not captured. Future scholarship is encouraged to broaden the number of individual perspectives that are explored.

It is also a limitation that this research occurred during the unique context of highly restricted in-person meetings brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2022. In order to ensure this research did not contribute to the spread of the virus, all of the focus groups were held in virtual meeting rooms with a video platform. Having spent the previous school year in an entirely virtual platform, many of the participants were adept with the technology, but each participant, including the researcher, appeared as isolated heads in an array as opposed to full humans in a room. This is noted as a limitation in that it did not provide the atmosphere of collaboration intended for the focus groups. One of the stated goals was to pay attention to the interactions of participants and their degree of assent and dissent, but that was made more difficult because of the technology and format. However, recent research on online focus groups indicates that the responses generated in an online focus group are comparable to the range of

responses of an in-person focus group (Richard, et al., 2020). Richard found that “in-person focus groups generated a greater word count, but there was a 91% overlap in key words” (p. 32). This study was conducted as a controlled trial where focus groups were formed simultaneously using the same protocols in the two different formats, virtual and in-person.

Additionally, another limitation is my positionality as a white male, cis-gendered, actively serving principal serving as moderator of the focus groups. My positionality has the potential to be both an advantage in my understanding of the role the participants are in at their school, but also limits my ability to be unbiased in the analysis of the responses. One of the potential concerns with focus groups is that the participants won't feel comfortable with each other or the moderator. Morgan (2019) notes that groups function best when there is common ground, which can be accomplished with an insider moderator. Additionally, my position as a white male is an element of the focus group and individual interview process that impacts the comfort and openness of the responses. My position as a white male principal also potentially contributes to bias throughout the coding process for both focus groups and individual interviews.

### **Implications**

Exclusionary discipline has consistently been identified as one of the areas schools and districts can do better. In 2016 the Obama White House released a national report that outlined the problem of exclusionary discipline and offered strategies to reduce the occurrence of it (2016). In Oregon, SB 553 modified the existing Oregon statute 339.250, further limiting the allowable uses of suspension and expulsion for

students grade 5 and younger (ORS, 2015). Despite an increased focus on and policy refinement about exclusionary discipline, the overall use of exclusionary practices continues to rise. This study set out to understand why principals continue to use exclusionary practices and what factors are considered throughout the disciplinary process.

The information gathered from the participants shows that while it may be appealing to isolate the various components of discipline in order to understand them and potentially shift practices, the problem itself is too complex for that approach. Creating behavior plans, while no doubt helpful, are a technical solution to an adaptive problem. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) note that adaptive problems require the organization to engage in new learning and discover new approaches to the problems they encounter. Technical solutions, however, are applications of existing practices and incremental shifts that while they work to ease discomfort in the short term do not lead to sustained change. Similarly, a statewide statute revision, or a district level policy adjustment does not address the complex way the entire system functions. This study attempted to isolate responses to scenarios and discussion about discipline in order to understand what factors contributed to the outcomes, only to find that at any given moment behaviorism, critical race, and coupling are all working in various ways to create the conditions that result in an exclusionary outcome or avoid one. In *School Leadership and Complexity Theory*, Morrison (2002) shows that one of the indicators of complex organizations is that they have overlapping areas of expertise throughout the system. He goes on to demonstrate that overlapping skills and expertise in teachers and staff allows the organization to be

“buoyant rather than brittle” (p. 53) and prioritizes where the teachers are generalists, not specialists (2002). This conception of complexity allows for a deeper understanding of how all of the various systems inside of an external to a school function in order to influence the decision-making process with regards to everything, including discipline. When an organization, like a school, is tightly coupled, it is more brittle, less flexible. This may appear as an efficiency, like when one participant in the study desired a “book that tells us what to do”, but in a complex organization like a school, it is the looseness, or flexibility that allows for all the various factors to impact the decision-making process. The challenge is the same as the benefit. Because there are so many contextual factors that weigh on a decision, the decision-making process is resistant to a prescriptive flowchart, a guide book, or a definitive chart that describes when one thing happens the outcome is this. The respondents in this study were dependent on context in order to do what is best for each student. However, the respondents also shared that context also allowed them to make decisions they identified as not best for the student, but were perhaps considered best for other students, or the adults or the community. The flexibility to respond to student needs opens the pathway for bias and disparate outcomes.

One of the primary concerns of the participants when considering discipline alternatives is the time and staffing it takes to manage behaviors that could result in exclusionary discipline. Without exception the participants wanted to reduce the number of incidents that resulted in exclusion. Participants indicated an awareness that training teachers to manage behaviors in the class, as opposed to calling for help for lower-level behaviors, would allow for fewer events that use administrator time. There was also a



recognition that for bigger behaviors, having non-classroom-based staff available to facilitate restorative practices and manage the behaviors as they are occurring would reduce the use of exclusion. As one principal noted, adding a staff member who was designated to work with teachers on behavior interventions as well as direct service with kids made a substantial difference in the school's ability to keep kids in class, and thus in school. Something as seemingly simple as a change in staffing, however, is indicative of the complexity of an organization. Staffing models are created in business offices and adhere to formulas that set the baseline for all the schools in a district. At some districts there are specific rules and policies about how staffing is allocated within the schools themselves, and principals have to address the basic needs of class size and program coverage before allocating staff to other roles. Because staffing impacts every aspect of the school experience, it is one area where flexibility that accounts for the racial and ethnic make-up of the students and staff can have a direct impact on the ability of a school to keep kids in school. Allowing the school team to shift staffing to address their specific needs, within reason considering the mandated program, is a potential way for the school to better address the needs of the students and staff and keep kids in school.

This study highlights the need for additional research in a number of areas. Additional research would be useful to better understand each of the identified pressures principals experience as they process disciplinary incidents in school. This study revealed pressure to remove students because of a lack of resources to manage behaviors, a lack of training to prevent the behaviors, adult concerns about safety, rigid rules about roles, and pressure from the community to demonstrate that "something" happens to

students that act out. There are, conversely, the pressures to keep students in school, including the knowledge that it is best for kids to stay, the hardship it puts on families, the relationships it harms with the student, and lack of effectiveness of exclusion. This study revealed some principals that made a determination that they would no longer use exclusionary discipline, and it would be instructive to better understand how they managed the student behaviors that had previously resulted in suspensions, and also how they worked with the various adults (teachers, parents, district staff) to address the shift in practices. It would also be interesting to hear the experience of discipline from other perspectives beyond the principal. Speaking to teachers about their beliefs around exclusionary practices, as well as capturing the direct experience of students and families who have been excluded would add to the overall understanding of this important area of work.

## **Conclusion**

There are many areas in education where there simply isn't enough research to come to a solid conclusion. Exclusionary discipline isn't one of them. Sending kids home for behaviors has been well established as a practice that harms students and has been shown to be used disproportionately on students of color. In the years since the strictest application of zero-tolerance policies, an increasing number of students have been suspended and expelled for a wide range of behaviors, including behaviors that do not relate to the safety of other students or staff. In Oregon, there has been an increased focus on exclusionary practices and there has been a revision of the legal definition of the behaviors that are allowable as reasons to suspend our youngest students. However, the

suspensions and expulsions have only increased in the years following the narrowing of allowable suspensions. While the problem is clear and undeniable, the solution is not.

This study looked at the principal perspective on exclusionary discipline practices in order to better understand what pressures and factors administrators were facing as they made decisions about discipline. The responses to the focus group questions and individual interviews showed that administrators are making decisions from the center of a tangle of competing issues that can be understood from three organizational perspectives: behaviorist practices, critical race theory and an understanding of how the school system is loosely coupled. What emerged is an understanding that trying to solve this adaptive problem with a series of technical solutions, policies and laws has not and is unlikely to work. Instead, for districts that are serious about reducing and even stopping the use of exclusionary practices, there must be a more systematic, supportive approach that addresses the lived experiences of administrators trying to do what is best under pressure from teachers, families, policies, union contracts, and the district itself.

## References

- Allen, R. L., & Liou, D. D. (2019). Managing whiteness: The call for educational leadership to breach the contractual expectations of white supremacy. *Urban Education, 54*(5), 677-705.
- American Federation of Teachers (2008) *Leading the Way: AFT-WV Advances School Safety Measures*. 8.
- Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O., & Weber, T. J. (2009). Leadership: Current Theories, Research, and Future Directions. *Annual Review of Psychology, 60*, 421–449.
- Bambara, L. M., Nonnemacher, S., & Kern, L. (2009). Sustaining School-Based Individualized Positive Behavior Support: Perceived Barriers and Enablers. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 11*(3), 161–176.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300708330878>
- Beekun, R. I., & Glick, W. H. (2001). Organization structure from a loose coupling perspective: A multidimensional approach. *Decision sciences, 32*(2), 227-250.
- Bellenger, D., Bernhardt, Kenneth L., & Goldstucker, Jac L. (1976). Qualitative research in marketing (American Marketing Association. Monographs series - American Marketing Association ; 3). Chicago: American Marketing Association.
- Bennett, W. J. W. J. (1996). *Body count: moral poverty-- and how to win America's war against crime and drugs*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Boser, U. (2011). *Teacher Diversity Matters: A State-by-State Analysis of Teachers of Color*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED535665>
- Bristol, T., & Fern, E. F. (2003). The effects of interaction on consumers' attitudes in focus groups. *Psychology and Marketing, 20*(5), 433–454.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.10080>

- Brooks, Jeffrey S., and Terri N. Watson.(2019). “School Leadership and Racism: An Ecological Perspective.” *Urban Education* 54, no. 5. 631–55.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918783821>.
- Brown, K., Skiba, R.J., & Eckes, S. (2010). African American Disproportionality in School Discipline: The Divide Between Best Evidence and Legal Remedy (Vol. 54).
- Browne-Dianis, J. (2011). Stepping BACK FROM ZERO TOLERANCE. *Educational Leadership*, 69(1), 24–28.
- Burke, A., & Nishioka, V. (2014). Suspension and expulsion patterns in six Oregon school districts (REL 2014–028). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.
- Butler, B. R., Lewis, C. W., Moore III, J. L., & Scott, M. E. (2012). Assessing the odds: Disproportional discipline practices and implications for educational stakeholders. *Journal of Negro Education*, 81(1), 11-24.
- Carr, David. Making Sense of Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Theory of Education and Teaching. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=237351>.
- Chafouleas, S. M., Johnson, A. H., Overstreet, S., & Santos, N. M. (2016). Toward a Blueprint for Trauma-Informed Service Delivery in Schools. *School Mental Health*, 8(1), 144–162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-015-9166-8>
- Chow, K. A., Gaylor, E., Grindal, T., Tunzi, D., Wei, X., & Tiruke, T. (2021). Associations of teacher characteristics with preschool suspensions and expulsions: Implications for supports. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 129, 106162.
- Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute. “Due Process of Law”  
[www.law.cornell.edu/constitution-conan/amendment-14/section-1/due-process-of-law](http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution-conan/amendment-14/section-1/due-process-of-law) retrieved 3/10/20.

- Cross, C. T. (2014). *Political education: Setting the course for state and federal policy, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Delgado, R. (2012). *Critical race theory: an introduction* (Second edition.). New York: New York University Press, NYU Press.
- Devine, P. G., Forscher, P. S., Austin, A. J., & Cox, W. T. L. (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(6), 1267–1278.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.06.003>
- Digest of Education Statistics, 2016. Retrieved November 23, 2017, from  
[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16\\_101.40.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_101.40.asp)
- Downey, D., & Pribesh, S. (2004). When Race Matters: Teachers' Evaluations of Students' Classroom Behavior. *Sociology of Education, 77*(4), 267–282.
- Fenning, P., & Rose, J. (2007). Overrepresentation of African American Students in Exclusionary Discipline The Role of School Policy. *Urban Education, 42*(6), 536–559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085907305039>
- Firestone, W. (1984). *The Study of Loose Coupling: Problems, Progress, and Prospects.*
- Fowler, F. (2013). *Policy studies for educational leaders An introduction 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* Boston: Pearson
- Fund, N. L. D. (2006). *Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.* New York, NY.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 106–16.
- Glaser, B. G. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Aldine de Gruyter.
- Goh, A., & Bambara, L. (2012). *Individualized Positive Behavior Support in School Settings: A Meta-Analysis*

<https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0741932510383990>

Guest, G., Namey, E., & Mckenna, K. (2017). How Many Focus Groups Are Enough? Building an Evidence Base for Nonprobability Sample Sizes. *Field Methods*, 29(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X16639015>

Gun Free Schools Act (1994). 20 USC 7961: Gun-free requirements

Gottfried, M. A. (2010). Evaluating the Relationship Between Student Attendance and Achievement in Urban Elementary and Middle Schools: An Instrumental Variables Approach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47(2), 434–465. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831209350494>

Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Heifetz, & Linsky, Martin. (2002). *Leadership on the line : staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Harvard Business School Press.

Henry-Hogarth, J. D. (2018). *Ejection Is Rejection: Factors That Influence Education Leaders' Continued Use of Exclusionary Discipline* [Ed.D., California State Polytechnic University, Pomona]. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2126735809/abstract/B8A6F378783E46CEPQ/1>

Hernández Sheets, Rosa. “Urban Classroom Conflict: Student-Teacher Perception: Ethnic Integrity, Solidarity, and Resistance.” *The Urban Review* 28, no. 2 (June 1996): 165–83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02354383>.

Ispa-Landa, S. (2017). Racial and gender inequality and school discipline: Toward a more comprehensive view of school policy. *Social Currents*, 4(6), 511-517.

Ispa-Landa, S. (2018). Persistently harsh punishments amid efforts to reform: Using tools from social psychology to counteract racial bias in school disciplinary decisions. *Educational Researcher*, 47(6), 384-390.

Jarrell, M. G. (2000). *Focusing on Focus Group Use in Educational Research*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED448167>

- Kaplin, L.S., & Owings, W.A. (2017). *Organizational behavior for school leadership: Leveraging your school for success*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kaveney, K., & Drewery, W. (2011). Classroom meetings as a restorative practice: A study of teachers' responses to an extended professional development innovation. *International Journal on School Disaffection*, 8(1), 5–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.18546/IJSD.08.1.02>
- Kennedy, B. L., Acosta, M. M., & Soutullo, O. (2019). Counternarratives of students' experiences returning to comprehensive schools from an involuntary disciplinary alternative school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 22(1), 130-149.
- Kennedy, B. L., Murphy, A. S., & Jordan, A. (2017). Title I middle school administrators' beliefs and choices about using corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline. *American Journal of Education*, 123(2).
- Kervick, C. T., Moore, M., Ballysingh, T. A., Garnett, B. R., & Smith, L. C. (2019). The Emerging Promise of Restorative Practices to Reduce Discipline Disparities Affecting Youth with Disabilities and Youth of Color: Addressing Access and Equity. *Harvard Educational Review*, 89(4), 588–610.  
<https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-89.4.588>
- Lacoe, J., & Steinberg, M. P. (2019). Do suspensions affect student outcomes?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41(1), 34-62.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria, & Tate, William F., IV. (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47-68.
- Leddon, L. L. (2011). *Compulsory attendance: An analysis of litigation*. ProQuest Information & Learning (US). Retrieved from  
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/857128675/abstract/EF0125791D7D4E4EPQ/1>
- Lindsay, C. A., & Hart, C. M. D. (2017). Teacher race and school discipline: Are students suspended less often when they have a teacher of the same race? *Education Next*, 17(1), 72-. Gale OneFile: Educator's Reference Complete.



- Losen, D. J. (2013). Discipline Policies, Successful Schools, Racial Justice, and the Law. *Family Court Review*, 51(3), 388–400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12035>
- Losen, D. J., & Gillespie, J. (2012). Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School - eScholarship. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3g36n0c3>
- Losen, D. J., & Skiba, R. J. (2010). *Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis*. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8fh0s5dv>
- Marianno, B. D., & Strunk, K. O. (2018). The bad end of the bargain?: Revisiting the relationship between collective bargaining agreements and student achievement. *Economics of Education Review*, 65, 93-106.
- Marion, R., & Gonzales, L.D. (2014) *Leadership in education: Organizational theory for the practitioner* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Marshall, K. (2013). *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation: How to Work Smart, Build Collaboration, and Close the Achievement Gap*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=1162065>
- McCluskey, G., Lloyd, G., Kane, J., Riddell, S., Stead, J., & Weedon, E. (2008). Can restorative practices in schools make a difference? *Educational Review*, 60(4), 405–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910802393456>
- McGrew, K. (2016). The Dangers of Pipeline Thinking: How the School-To-Prison Pipeline Metaphor Squeezes Out Complexity. *Educational Theory*, 66(3), 341–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12173>
- Mendoza, Martin, Jamilia J. Blake, Miner P. Marchbanks, and Kelsey Ragan. (2020). “Race, Gender, and Disability and the Risk for Juvenile Justice Contact.” *The Journal of Special Education* 53, no. 4: 226–35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466919845113>.
- Merriam, S., & Tisdell, Elizabeth J. (2016). *Qualitative research : A guide to design and implementation* (Fourth ed., Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass : A Wiley Brand.

- Meyer, H. D. (2002). From “loose coupling” to “tight management”? Making sense of the changing landscape in management and organization theory. *Journal of Educational Administration*.
- Michail, S. (2011). Understanding school responses to students’ challenging behaviour: A review of literature. *Improving Schools*, 14(2), 156–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480211407764>
- Mongan, P., & Walker, R. (2012). “The Road to Hell Is Paved With Good Intentions”: A Historical, Theoretical, and Legal Analysis of Zero-Tolerance Weapons Policies in American Schools. *Preventing School Failure*, 56(4), 232–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2011.654366>
- Montecinos, C., Cortez, M., Valenzuela, J. P., Zett, I., & Zoro, B. (2022). Teachers’ agentic actions in tight and loosely coupled effective secondary schools in Chile. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 115, 103731.
- Morgan, D. L. S. (2014). *Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods: A pragmatic approach*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Morgan, D. L. S. (2019). *Basic and advanced focus groups*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Morrison, Keith.(2002) *School Leadership and Complexity Theory*. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=1099099>.
- Nelson, J. M. (2016). *Middle and High School Principals’ Perceptions of Exclusionary Discipline Practices* [Ed.D., Tennessee State University]. <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1824054534/abstract/C8F3A08113874CF0PQ/1>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002).
- Oregon Department of Education. (2019). *Oregon Department of Education Discipline Data Media File*. <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and->

[family/healthsafety/Pages/School-Discipline.-Bullying.-Restraint-and-Seclusion.aspx](#)

Oregon Revised Statutes 339.250, 2.c.A (2015)

Osborne, D. D. (2015). *Applying Frances Fowler's model to analyze the history of compulsory attendance laws in the United States* (Ed.D.). Northern Illinois University, United States -- Illinois. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1695831470/abstract/F17A832A1E7F4040PQ/1>

Pedersen, B., Delmar, C., Falkmer, U., & GrønkJær, M. (2016). Bridging the gap between interviewer and interviewee: Developing an interview guide for individual interviews by means of a focus group. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 30(3), 631–638. <https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.12280>

Petteruti, A. (2011). Education under arrest: The case against police in schools (Vol. 1). Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarrest\\_fullreport.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarrest_fullreport.pdf)

Radd, S. I., & Grosland, T. J. (2019). Desirablizing whiteness: A discursive practice in social justice leadership that entrenches white supremacy. *Urban education*, 54(5), 656-676.

Safran, S. P., & Oswald, K. (2003). Positive Behavior Supports: Can Schools Reshape Disciplinary Practices? *Exceptional Children*, 69(3), 361–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290306900307>

Sanon, D. A. (2017). The Use of Exclusionary Discipline Practices by Second-Year Assistant Principals in High Poverty Elementary Schools (Doctoral dissertation, Florida Gulf Coast University).

Scott, T. M., Alter, P. J., Rosenberg, M., & Borgmeier, C. (2010). Decision-making in Secondary and Tertiary Interventions of School-Wide Systems of Positive Behavior Support. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 33(4), 513–535. <https://doi.org/10.1353/etc.2010.0003>

- Silver, C., & Lewins, A. (2014). *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473906907>
- Skiba, R. (2004a). *Zero Tolerance: The Assumptions and the Facts*. *Education Policy Briefs. Volume 2, Number 1, Summer 2004*. Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, 509 E. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED488918>
- Skiba, R. (2004b). *The Disciplinary Practices Survey How Do Indiana's Principals Feel about Discipline*. *Children Left Behind Policy Briefs. Supplementary Analysis 2-C*. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Skiba, R. J., Chung, C.-G., Trachok, M., Baker, T. L., Sheya, A., & Hughes, R. L. (2014). Parsing Disciplinary Disproportionality: Contributions of Infraction, Student, and School Characteristics to Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(4), 640–670. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214541670>
- Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Choong-Geun Chung, Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race Is Not Neutral: A National Investigation of African American and Latino Disproportionality in School Discipline. *School Psychology Review*, 40(1), 85–107.
- Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. (2000). The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment. Policy Research Report. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED468512>
- Skiba, R., & Peterson, R. (1999). The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools? *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(5), 372–382.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2017). Critical Race Theory and the Whiteness of Teacher Education. *Urban Education*, 52(2), 155–169.
- Sparks, Sarah D. (2021). 4 Myths About Suspensions That Could Hurt Students In The Long Term. *Education Week*, 41(4), 7–7.
- Stefkovich, J. A. (2014). *Best Interests of the Student* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

- Steinberg, M. P., & Lacoë, J. (2017). What do we know about school discipline reform? Assessing the alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. *Education Next*, 17(1), 44-53.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. (2002). The Evolution of Discipline Practices: School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 24(1-2), 23-50.
- Swanson, J., & Welton, A. (2019). When good intentions only go so far: White principals leading discussions about race. *Urban Education*, 54(5), 732-759.
- Tefera, Adai, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, and Rachel Levy. "Why Do Racial Disparities in School Discipline Exist? The Role of Policies, Processes, People, and Places," n.d., 20.
- The Gun-Free Schools Act, 20 U.S.C. § 8921(f) (1994).
- Theoharis, G. (2008). Woven in Deeply: Identity and Leadership of Urban Social Justice Principals. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(1), 3-25.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124508321372>
- Tookes, G. D. (2017). *Principals' and Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Their School Discipline Policies in Relationship to Student Achievement* [Ph.D. Lead., Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University].  
<http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1972149020/abstract/C32098611D3D4B2CPQ/1>
- Townsend, B. L. (2000). The Disproportionate Discipline of African American Learners: Reducing School Suspensions and Expulsions. *Exceptional Children*, 66(3), 381-391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290006600308>
- Vaughn, S., Schumm, Jeanne Shay, & Sinagub, Jane. (1996). Focus group interviews in education and psychology. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E. (1982) Management of organizational change among loosely coupled elements. In P. S. Goodman & Associates (Eds.), *Change in organizations* (pp. 375-408). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). The School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(5), 752–794.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318791582>
- Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). Caste and control in schools: A systematic review of the pathways, rates and correlates of exclusion due to school discipline. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 94, 315–339.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.09.031>
- Welton, A., Diem, S., & Carpenter, B. W. (2019). Negotiating the politics of antiracist leadership: The challenges of leading under the predominance of whiteness. *Urban Education*, 54(5), 627-630.
- Williams, A. M. (2016). *A longitudinal analysis of disproportionality in statewide exclusionary discipline of students with disabilities* [M.A., University of Maryland, College Park].  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1799981265/abstract/6A7FBB5E7ED746D3PQ/1>
- White House Report: The Continuing Need To Rethink Discipline. (2016, December 09). States News Service.
- Zeng, S., Corr, C. P., O’Grady, C., & Guan, Y. (2019). Adverse childhood experiences and preschool suspension expulsion: A population study. *Child abuse & neglect*, 97, 104149.
- Zhou, M. & Brown, D. (2015) Educational learning theories. Open Educational Resource  
at:<http://oer.galileo.usg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=education-textbooks>

## Appendix A--Recruitment Letter

### Recruitment Letter to Participants

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Jeremy Cohen, Principal at Rose City Park Elementary School in Portland Public Schools. I am also an Education Doctorate candidate at Portland State University, and it is for this purpose that I am reaching out to you. I am conducting a study of disciplinary practices in K-8 schools in the Portland metropolitan area.

I am writing to request your participation in a focus group (remote format) with other currently serving school based administrators to discuss the various practices you are using as a part of the disciplinary process at your school, with particular interest in the reasoning underlying different decisions. This focus group will last approximately 90 minutes. Additionally, after the focus group it is possible that I will seek further clarification about your answers through remote individual interviews, which will not last more than one hour. These groups and interviews will be recorded through the video conference platform and you will have the opportunity to view the videos and transcripts before this study is complete.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are in a position to make disciplinary decisions at your school, and you have been in your same role for at least 2 years.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this project will be kept confidential by the researcher, and any identifying information will be removed. Specifically, any printed use of this information will require the removal of your name and any information that would make it possible to identify you and removal of any organization to which you belong or any people mentioned in your responses. However, be aware your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group setting such as this. Please respect one another's privacy by not discussing who attended this meeting or repeating what was said.

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose to participate, then let me thank you in advance for your assistance in my research. In addition, after the study begins, you may choose to stop your participation at any time during this study. If you have any questions whatsoever about this request or the research itself, please feel free to contact me, Jeremy Cohen, at 503-679-7964, [wjc2@pdx.edu](mailto:wjc2@pdx.edu), or our Portland State University doctoral candidate supervisor, Pat Burk, at 503-725-4619, [burk@pdx.edu](mailto:burk@pdx.edu).

If you are interested in participating in this study of discipline practices in K-8 schools please respond to me at [wjc2@pdx.edu](mailto:wjc2@pdx.edu) by (Date).

Sincerely,

Jeremy Cohen

Ed.D. Candidate

Portland State University



## Appendix B--Consent to Participate

**Consent to Participate in Research**

**Project Title:** Helping Teachers Teach By Keeping Students In The Room: A Study Of Practices And Policies To Reduce Exclusionary Disciplinary Practices in K-8 Schools.

**Population:** Adults, Focus Group interviews and individual interviews

**Sponsor:** Pat Burk, PhD

**Researcher:** Jeremy Cohen, College of Education  
Portland State University

**Researcher Contact:** [wjc2@pdx.edu](mailto:wjc2@pdx.edu) 503-679-7964

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully review the information provided on this form. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide to participate.

<b>Key Information for You to Consider</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Voluntary Consent.</b> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</li> <li>● <b>Purpose.</b> The purpose of this research is to study the disciplinary practices used in K-8 schools in the Portland metropolitan area.</li> <li>● <b>Duration.</b> It is expected that your participation will last 90 minutes for the focus group, possible additional individual interview for less than 60 additional minutes</li> <li>● <b>Procedures and Activities.</b> You will be asked to answer questions about your thoughts and practices related to discipline at your school in a group setting.</li> <li>● <b>Risks.</b> Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include stress, loss of privacy and inconvenience.</li> <li>● <b>Benefits.</b> Some of the benefits that may be expected include no direct benefit, however this research may contribute to better outcomes for students across Oregon and elsewhere</li> <li>● <b>Alternatives.</b> Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate</li> </ul>

**Why is this research being done?**

The purpose of the research is to better understand the underlying reasons administrators use to make decisions regarding discipline in a K-8 context. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are in a position to make disciplinary decisions at your school, and you have been in your same role for at least 2 years. About 15 people will take part in this research.

**How long will I be in this research?**

We expect that your participation will last 90 minutes, with an additional 60 minute individual interview if necessary for clarification or follow up.

**What happens if I agree to participate?**

If you agree to be in this research, your participation will include participating in a group discussion with 4-5 other administrators on the topic of student discipline. We will tell you about any new information that may affect your willingness to continue participation in this research.

**What happens to the information collected?**

Information collected for this research will be used to better understand how to support administrators making disciplinary decisions and will appear in a written dissertation.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**

We will take measures to protect your privacy including removing any identifying names of people and organizations and any other identifiable factors from your responses. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected.

To protect the security of all of your personal information, we will replace all identifiable information with codes and keep the key in a separate locked location. Despite these precautions, we can never fully guarantee the confidentiality of all study information.

Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information. These individuals and organizations include [the Institutional Review Board that reviewed this research.

**What other choices do I have besides participation in this research?**

It is your choice to decide if you want to participate or not to participate in research.

**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from participation at any point without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to

participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

**Will I be paid for participating in this research?**

There is no compensation for participation.

**Who can answer my questions about this research?**

If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:

Jeremy Cohen, Portland State University  
503-679-7964  
wjc2@pdx.edu

**Who can I speak to about my rights as a research participant?**

The Portland State University Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who independently review research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office at Portland State University that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights, or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Office of Research Integrity  
PO Box 751  
Portland, OR 97207-0751  
Phone: (503) 725-5484  
Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400  
Email: [psuirb@pdx.edu](mailto:psuirb@pdx.edu)

**Consent Statement**

I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to provide consent prior to me continuing in the study.

I consent to participate in this study.

---

**Name of Adult Participant**  
**Date**

**Signature of Adult Participant**

**Researcher Signature** (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

---

**Name of Research Team Member**  
**Date**

**Signature of Research Team Member**

## Appendix C Focus Group Question Guide

### Focus Group Question Guide

Thank you all for coming today to discuss this important topic. I know your time is valuable and I really appreciate your being here. The main reason to bring a group of people together is to hear about your different and similar experiences.

In this case I am interested in hearing about your experiences with discipline processes in your school, specifically with suspensions and expulsions.

Welcome. Please tell everyone your name, the grades your school serves and your role in the school

1. Let's hear all the things that come to mind when you think about student discipline at your school. (Generate a list for all members to see)

2. I want to present you with a scenario. Feel free to jot notes, responses, or questions. When I have finished the scenario, I will open up the discussion to address two issues: 1. What else, if anything would you want to know? and 2. What are the possible outcomes and what would make each of the outcomes likely?

**Scenario:** The office gets a call from a teacher. There is a student screaming at the teacher, throwing books and materials on the floor. The teacher has asked for help, and has the class in the hallway. The student has hit two students and the teacher with thrown books. [Consider listing all the information they still want--and asking how that will affect the decision]

3. At your school, what behaviors place a student at risk of removal from class? Where do they go and what happens to them? (Generate a flow chart with various points of interaction)
4. Who makes decisions about when students return to class or if they go home? (Follow up) At your school, what factors get considered before a student is suspended? (Generate a list)
5. How are racial and demographic factors considered in this?(Use if these don't come up?)
6. For what types of infractions are students suspended? Expelled?
7. When considering a suspension is there anyone else you talk to or seek advice/permission from?
8. What other discipline practices do you use at your school? What makes them effective or ineffective?

9. Do you ever feel pressure to keep students in school OR pressure to suspend them? Where does that pressure come from?

10. What would you need to increase your school's capacity to reduce exclusionary discipline?

11. If you were giving advice to the next principal of your school with regard to discipline at your particular school, what would you tell them?

I Plan to use probes as needed to maintain flow (e.g., What else? Examples, other points of view, etc.) if/when the discussion lags.

## Appendix D: Individual Interview Question Guide

### Individual Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to talk a bit further about the topic of disciplinary practices at your school. After the focus group, there were some additional questions I have that don't require the entire group.

1. Can you walk me through the process you use at your school with regards to discipline?
2. Can you tell me about the last incident that resulted in a suspension? What happened, who responded, what was the context, what was the outcome?
3. Can you tell me about the last incident that could have, but did not result in a suspension? What happened, who responded, what was the context, what was the outcome?
4. Tell me how the race of the student and the race of the teacher impact the types of decisions that are made with regard to discipline.
5. In our focus group you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me more about that?

## Appendix E: First Phase Framework Coding

**Table 2**

**Framework Matrix for FG 1 Coding**

<b>Behaviorism</b>	<b>Critical Race Theory</b>
<p>Q1: Expectations are taught, reinforced (7:02) Interventions and support (7:50) Consequences (8:01) agreement (8:15) Q2: Prior actions, antecedent (12:38), (12:52) Behavior Support Plan (13:09) Student removed from others during debrief/de-escalation (19:24) agreement (19:29, 19:31) Behavior is not in control of student (20:07) Teacher doesn't want them back in room (20:44) Q3: Q4: de-escalation cycle can dictate the response (32:32) Call to parents can result in kid going home (33:35) Consider the resources and what happens when you call specific parents (33:58) Do we have the ability to do this today? (34:40) Q5: Teachers "need" this kid out of my room (45:49) Some teachers are NO! I don't want them back in my room (46:56) Buddy Classrooms (48:13) Buddy classroom avoids solving the problem (48:36) Teachers asking students to step out, but then the kid leaves (49:50) There need to be consequences to reset the culture of a school (53:26) Q6: Pressure to keep kids in No, parents want their kids suspended (55:59) Reasonable response to behavior (suspension) (57:13) Classroom community creates a buffer for discipline (K-5 vs. MS) (57:59) Mom upset because her kid was at home instead of school, denied the behaviors that resulted in staff harm (59:03) Mom didn't believe the harm, but there were multiple incidents with scars, harm (1:00:00)</p>	<p>Q1: Q2: This is where CRT would ask how race impacts this...why did it not come up at all? Q3: schools with lots of white privilege lower level behaviors get elevated (30:12) Q4: Staffing creates inequities in schools (36:03) Impact of district wide systems (36:10) Q5: If student of color vs. white kid, white parents demand kid goes home. If white vs. white, not as much (37:18) Of course race and ethnicity play into it (38:56) Race impacts all decision making, climate, academics, so it isn't limited to discipline (39:29) Now I feel like I am in a school where it is a philosophy (40:10) Developing process that has impacted discipline but didn't start there (41:23) Historical elements of racism, classism and inequity leads us to support students (41:42) Consistent makes it predictable--which is how we went to no suspensions because we took that outcome away (43:54) Removal of biased outcomes by eliminating the consequence part (44:43) At middle school we have specific teachers with policies to get a kid out of the room (45:10) Kids sent out of room was mostly black boys and girls (45:49) Q6: Pressure to keep kids in Black parent encouraged suspension</p>



<p>I wish we had used suspension to make sure the kid knew he was out of chances (1:02:32)  District Response Team was not helpful, not called them back ever again (1:08:26)  Teacher burn out because the response doesn't change the situation (1:09:06)  Q7: Magic Wand  Need people to sit with the one kid otherwise we don't get anything done. (1:15:00)  Kid knows if I kick my teacher I am out of here (1:20:29)</p>	<p>and then worked with school--relationship (56:48)  Q7: Magic Wand  Teaches would better engage the students(1:11;15)  Culturally relevant instruction (1:15:43)  Mental health crisis overwhelms the teaching (1:16:53)</p>
<p><b>Loose Coupling Theory</b>  Q1: Definition of discipline: (6:49)  Q2:Existing structures of support (Check in, circles, zones of regulation) (14:15)  Restorative conversation (16:08) (16:30)  Assign a staff member to be with kid IF there are any people available (16:53)  Talk with class about welcoming kid back in (17:15)  Who helps depends on staffing (18:12)  Counselor (18:40) but no subs for counselors (18:44)  Contract about discipline (19:35)  Q3: who works with the student depends on the relationships (23:53)  Chill out space/sensory circuit (24:57)  A system and process to deescalate (24:57)  Principal decides when it is time to go back (24:57)  Building by building is different (27:30)  Sending a kid home is an option that invites inconsistency (28:13)  Really big behaviors, but that is different building by building (29:09)  Can't do more than 2 days without talking to supervisor (29:09)  Schools without systems for lower level behaviors send home kids for lesser behaviors (28:36)  Q4:this can impact hiring decisions because an AP can respond but some other work groups won't/can refuse (35:12)  Staffing creates inequalities in schools (36:03)  Q5:I'm really glad I work in a system that's not like you have to follow this rule book no matter</p>	<p><b>Complexity Theory</b>  Q1:Special Education Classrooms (4:30), (5:36)  Focus Option School (5:13)  Q2: What is happening for teacher and other students (13:09)  Consider the needs of the student, are they hungry (13:37)  Grounding activity (14:34)  Safety (15:02) of students  Communication with families of kids (16:30)  Grade level dependent (16:53)  Talk with class, but also teacher (17:50)  Teacher can use the contract to remove student (19:35)  If you have enough people to debrief (20:07)  Q3:Teacher has to be consulted with return to class (22:27)  Multiple types of conflict--Peer to peer, student to teacher (22:27)  We don't have enough space or people to keep kids at school (28:36)  Q4:Depends on the time of day because of the resources and the amount of time remaining to supervise the student (32:01)  Q5:Shift in school culture when equity became infused in daily experience instead of a set aside time (40:43)  Saying we don't suspend kids give them too much power (52:53)  Difficult to get consistent support for</p>

<p>what happens (41:42)  Professional Judgement (41:42)  Teachers make policies to kick kids out (45:11)  Teachers make systems that work for them, but aren't even known (48:58)  Teachers are told NOT to call the office (51:32)  Q6: Pressure to keep kids in  Kid got tons of support and avoided suspension for a long time, but then big (one sided fight) which resulted in expulsion (1:02:32)  District response isn't helpful because buildings have already tried that solution (1:10:03)  Q7: Magic Wand  Need district support (1:13:45)  We just said we weren't going to do this (1:13:45)  District support would be manpower/staff (1:14:37)  Re-entry process and teachers owning their role is not consistent (1:21:41)  Q8: Who do you consult with?  Other team members in school (1:24:45)  Other administrators (1:25:20)  Not helpful to call supervisor (1:26:20)  Supervisors don't know context (1:27:19)  AP (if they are trusted) (1:27:52)  Need to partner with AP--will travel to PD with them, be developed together (1:30:08)</p>	<p>students in a district with so many inconsistencies (53:54)  In order to get to a system, you have to suspend some kids (54:34)  Suspension as a tool to reset school culture (54:55)  Q6: Pressure to keep kids in  Parent doesn't think their kid started it so it shouldn't be their "fault" (57:27)  Suspension for support from district when all other tools have been exhausted (1:06:49)  Use of Suspension as a tool to demonstrate a need for support (1:03:06)  Suspension as advocacy (1:03:54)  Suspension as a way to get the district to pay attention to a kid (1:03:54)  Q7: Magic Wand  Neet training on Mental health, Trauma Informed care (1:11:48)  Suspension is the tool we have, but there needs to be a deeper response option (1:18)  Mental Health days provided by parents, but some have to send their kid to school no matter what (1:19:13)  Classrooms are pretty standard, there aren't many options (1:23:10)  We are mental health providers (1:24:00)</p>
--	---

**Table 3**

**Framework Matrix for FG 2 Coding**

<p><b>Behaviorism</b>  Q1: Behavioris as developmentally appropriate based on age(4:47)  They aren't' doing it to annoy teachers (4:47)  First thing is to look at adult behaviors and ask</p>	<p><b>Critical Race Theory</b>  Q1  Q2 (behavior scenario)  Q3 (what happens next)  We shifted staffing to build skill over</p>
--	---

<p>what am I reinforcing? (5:50)</p> <p>Q2: (behavior scenario)what was the antecedent, is it repeated behavior</p> <p>Q3 (what happens next): There is the physical mess and the emotional mess (14:45)</p> <p>Depends on how the kid is responding. Are they taking responsibility (15:36)</p> <p>Have to pay attention to how the kid responds to parent calls, ownership (15:36)</p> <p>I had a kid who needed me to just stay in the room to help her regulate (17:16)</p> <p>Offering binary choices (17:42)</p> <p>Perception that meeting kid needs is reinforcing wrong behavior (18:43)</p> <p>If you (adult) are mad because I give the kid a fidget and a snack--I'm not giving him a treat, I'm treating him like a 7 year old (25:54)</p> <p>With relationships I can remind teachers when they were upset and I supported them as well (26:10)</p> <p>They told me: We don't write referrals because we will get in trouble (26:34)</p> <p>Q4 (who decides when to come back)</p> <p>We set the tone in the beginning of the year and say these things need to be done by the teacher, and by us (31:30)</p> <p>You have to discern if the kid is trying to get an extra break or recess or whatever but then ask the teacher why is that? (32:19)</p> <p>Why is meeting with me more attractive than math or the activity you are doing in class? (32:19)</p> <p>Clear protocol for Kinder, reset time and process. (33:42)</p> <p>Referral process reinforces bad behaviors (35:48)</p> <p>Provided a script to teachers to indicate if they wanted a break from the kid, or a break from the class to work with the kid (38:21)</p> <p>We suspended parents by bringing them in to school (39:22)</p> <p>The teacher also had to get it together and remember they are teaching in a community (39:22)</p> <p>If we keep offering interventions and they don't work, we can need a break (43:34)</p> <p>We talk about a behavior safety plan, and FBA before we get there (44:16)</p>	<p>time, which worked with our Equity work (BARWE) (24:29)</p> <p>It is usually a black boy, and there are teachers who will cite the contract to not have them back (24:29)</p> <p>Q4 (who decides when to come back)</p> <p>We have a behavior coach who has great relationships with kids, but then when he brings kids back the teacher is giving the eye like "why are you bringing this kid back to me" (37:40)</p> <p>Q5: who do you consult?</p> <p>Q6: Other pressure to suspend or not? I remember being a [racial identifier] in a mostly [racial identifier] school--it was important to be explicit about decisions (53:56)</p> <p>I don't think anybody who goes into schools to contribute to the school to prison pipeline (57:48)</p> <p>We have this racial equity lens and glossy book about [vision and mission] but we permit (suspensions) by our lack of focus on it. (58:40)</p> <p>I feel bad for new administrators of color-they have authority, but also responsibility and autonomy but have to be in compliance with unwritten codes (1:02:19)</p> <p>Q7: What would you need to reduce it? Highly engaging, relevant curriculum, student leadership and empowerment (as opposed to control) and strong interventions(1:04:22)</p> <p>Stronger parent/school relationships. We aren't going back to pretending you won't talk to a family all year I hope (1:09:59)</p> <p>Advise:</p> <p>I stood at the front door everyday, and nobody even knew I was the principal, but as a white woman I became a face they saw and eventually they would learn who I was, but they already had seen me with kids (1:16:34)</p> <p>I want to be explicit about my centering</p>
---	---

<p>Some of it is predictable--spring soccer with 4th grade boys. Sometimes we have to take a break from soccer (47:18)</p> <p>Q5: who do you consult? I'm very mindful that if you suspend for the wrong thing you might be in [the paper] (48:26)</p> <p>Q6: Other pressure to suspend or not? It has become more about the numbers than the best practices (55:44)</p> <p>The district is not putting time or energy into supporting principals who are suspending left and right (57:48)</p> <p>I'm neither held accountable nor is anyone celebrating that I'm not suspending kids (57:48)</p> <p>Nobody is calling me to the carpet for the first two years when I was suspending kids left and right (58:40)</p> <p>SpEd department needs to see severe behaviors AND severe responses (suspension) to move on some kids (59:30)</p> <p>Q7: What would you need to reduce it? Book study of Beyond Carrots and Sticks (Greene)(1:06:05)</p> <p>Parents have seen their kids in CDL roll around on the floor and still learn, still get the answer correct (1:11:41)</p> <p>We need to figure out what we are going to do for the wigglers because their parents saw them learn and they aren't going to want them to sit still all day (1:11:41)</p> <p>Q8: Advise? Don't give them radios--it makes it too easy to call for help (1:13:35)</p>	<p>kids and students of color, but I don't want to be an annoying equity warrior who talks about it all the time, but picking a few important areas to be explicit. (1:19:46)</p>
<p><b>Loose Coupling Theory</b></p> <p>Q1</p> <p>Q2 (behavior scenario):What is happening to the student in crisis if the teacher and other kids are out of the room (10:40) I would need to deploy staff to that kid (10:40)</p> <p>Q3 (what happens next) Is the child ready to start cleaning it up? (14:29) There are parents who want to take their kid home right away (14:31) Staffing matches our needs (19:59) When admin enters situation vs. others is</p>	<p><b>Complexity Theory</b></p> <p>Q1: Discipline roots comes from to learn (4:04) Kids can make mistakes and we catch them(Support) (4:47) Discipline is a blanket thrown over all this other stuff in education (6:40) Referrals are about adults, not kids (6:40) Teachers exercise that part of the contract (8:03) Q2: (behavior scenario)</p>

<p>important for relationship building (19:59)  Schools don't have enough support. We had Kinder classes of 29 with no support, AP on leave...(21:04)  I hired a [behavior coach] which made a difference (21:42)  district team for crisis behaviors was useless (21:42)  Had some flexible staffing to spend because of our numbers [race, poverty, ELL] (22:12)  We deployed whomever has the best relationship with the kid (22:31)  The support allows the teacher to NOT do the work (22:52) they just want that kid out of class (22:52)  Switched to a Licensed coach instead of classified to work with teachers (23:35)  Arrived to a system where teachers were told to keep all behaviors in class, no referrals (26:34)  Then it shifted to calling all the time, so we had to build in systems slowly. (26:59)  One grade was able to implement a soft start which helped a ton, but trying to get it spread to other grades exposed resistance (29:06)  Q4 (who decides when to come back)  Using staff to cover classes so the teacher can do the repair (35:48)  When I got here kids were being suspended left and right but it wasn't in the system (39:32)  We got rid of suspension except when it was really violent and we needed a safety plan (40:47)  The law changed a few years ago--I don't remember the exact language but it was something like criminally violent. (41:19)  Some senior leadership didn't know the law (41:49)  Sometimes we tell a family to keep the kid at home because we can't keep him safe. Its not punishment, but safety (42:51)  Suspension is my very last tool. I make it clear to the staff that we have tried everything else. (44:16)  I feel boxed in by the district or by what's available to us to promise all the kids we cram in a whole bunch of little bodies (44:16)  There are very few opportunities as a leader to be</p>	<p>Re-entry was a function of specific relationships (18:10)  How old is the student (9:42)  What was going on (9:47)  Need to think about is the kid OK?  What about the other kids in the room? (10:15)  Is the teacher ready and available to support the kids (11:19)  Was the student who was hit targeted or bystander? (12:36)  Lots of debriefing and getting multiple perspectives (12:54)  Slowing down and figuring out what really happened before...(12:54)  There is probably more than just what happened in the moment (13:56)  Need to check in with the teacher as well (10:42)    Q3 (what happens next):  Kid's needs could be varied--time with an adult, time to clean it up, maybe need to figure some stuff out (14:47)  Depends on context of kid--a kindergartner maybe has lagging skills, or a 4th grader has been picked on (16:46)  You have to have relationships with the teachers to call it out (25:14)  It is better when the teachers hold each other accountable call each other out (25:44)  Systems need time to get established so that when a call comes in we know it is real serious (27:26)  Q4 (who decides when to come back)  It really depends on the kid being ready, or the teacher being ready, or us having the time to process it all (30:43)  People want it to be simple and straightforward like getting a speeding ticket (31:15)  The timeline is kid based and can include lots of factors. (34:08)  Letting kid voice into the conversation</p>
--	---

<p>trained in what to do with an escalated 1st grader (45:21)</p> <p>Q5: who do you consult?</p> <p>My AP, my administrative team (48:24)</p> <p>Sometimes my [supervisor], it is year to year based on who it is (48:26)</p> <p>I have had a [supervisor] really question why I haven't been suspending (49:30)</p> <p>That puts me in a tricky spot, like do I ethically move in one way or another (49:55)</p> <p>This is my first year with a [supervisor] who I trust to be a thought partner and not a judge (50:12)</p> <p>I have some people in the district that I call because I need a thought partner, I forget what is in my toolbox (50:39)</p> <p>I just need a thought partner, I'm stressed out and I can't keep track of what I know and what I don't know (50:39)</p> <p>There was a district person years ago that would pull all the discipline people once a month and go through the discipline handbook together to interpret (50:39)</p> <p>Its important for the district to have professional development for the disciplinarians (52:04)</p> <p>I had an AP who had never done discipline work and so she avoided it (52:04)</p> <p>Q6: Other pressure to suspend or not?</p> <p>What I am able to do now (after years in the building) is different now (54:33)</p> <p>The metrics have shifted from you can't suspend anybody to the union saying you have to (55:44)</p> <p>Alot of the things we have put in place were despite the district not because of it (56:15)</p> <p>We noticed lunch recess was a trouble spot and it took stumbling into somebody that was doing it differently (56:15)</p> <p>Its because we as a building decided, which speaks to the district value, around it (58:40)</p> <p>Mixed messages from our SpEd department about suspensions (59:18)</p> <p>Its not calibrated. Some schools 2 suspensions is a really big deal, others 10 percent of the kids have suspensions (1:00:00)</p> <p>Its like benign neglect. You find smart people in a meeting and happen to ask the right question. Its</p>	<p>opens up the possibility that it won't "look" the same for all kids (35:40)</p> <p>You need a whole bunch of staff who can problem solve (45:21)</p> <p>Sometimes our reaction to student behavior is also a symptom of what we are dealing with as a system (45:21)</p> <p>What tools are provided to me as well (as the leader) and supported (45:21)</p> <p>We need to be prepared to offer something more than saying we don't know what to do (46:15)</p> <p>I think there are patterns of certain classrooms or certain spaces and how we are providing guidance for teachers (46:15)</p> <p>Q5: who do you consult?</p> <p>There is a political piece to this as well (48:26)</p> <p>I'm very mindful that if you suspend for the wrong thing you might be in [the paper] (48:26)</p> <p>Q6: Other pressure to suspend or not?</p> <p>Other parents want to know what is happening, but with a trusting relationship I need to honor the privacy (53:26)</p> <p>I'm not going to talk about another child with you (53:46)</p> <p>Before we had systems built, I had to be really specific that we weren't suspending for this anymore (54:33)</p> <p>This was always like intentional goals in my school improvement plan (55:00)</p> <p>It was really intense...I needed people to share details about what happened so they knew it wasn't just mouthing off in the hallway (55:00)</p> <p>If we are going to actually build capacity to meet kids where they are, we need training for that but they just show us the data and shame us (55:44)</p> <p>I worry about new administrators. How do they make heads or tails about any of this. Its happenstance, not systemic (1:00:00)</p>
--	--

<p>about the informal networks we create rather than the structures that exist (1:00:48)</p> <p>Some [supervisors] want to know everything and some don't want to know anything.(1:02:57)</p> <p>Q7: What would you need to reduce it?</p> <p>Dedicated time with my staff to really work on it (1:06:05)</p> <p>We need to dive into this work, but it takes buy in from our staff (1:07:10)</p> <p>We just switched from radios to using chat on our phones (1:14:57)</p>	<p>The PD we get is just silly being run by people who have never been principals. Its like they are nervous to put us in a room together to dialogue (1:01:20)</p> <p>Q7: What would you need to reduce it?</p> <p>There needs to be more flexibility in our schools. For some kids the routines don't work (1:07:32)</p> <p>We have to break down this single idea of how you do school (1:07:32)</p> <p>How do we address the kids that coming to school is trauma? (1:08:39)</p> <p>Sometimes I send a kid home because the school is the toxin (1:09:17)</p> <p>Advise:</p> <p>You've got to get to know the kids and parents first. Don't let the staff control the narrative (1:15:49)</p> <p>I would be even more explicit when I am putting the needs of the kids ahead of the adults so it would be more quick for them to see it (1:18:29)</p> <p>SpEd department needs to see severe behaviors AND severe responses (suspension) to move on some kids (59:30)</p>
---	---

**Table 4**

**Framework Matrix for FG 3 Coding**

<p><b>Behaviorism</b></p> <p>Q1: What comes up when I say discipline?</p> <p>Addressing unexpected behaviors (5:21)</p> <p>School climate determines what is expected and what is unexpected (5:21)</p> <p>I think it is often punitive, not an opportunity for learning (6:53)</p> <p>No just how do we punish, but how do we punish enough so it feels equal to what? (7:27)</p>	<p><b>Critical Race Theory</b></p> <p>Q1: What comes up when I say discipline?</p> <p>Q2: Scenario--what more do you want to know?</p> <p>Q4: What would result in a kid being sent home?</p> <p>Q5: Who do you consult with?</p> <p>Black administrator identified a retired</p>
--	---

An eye for an eye system where two teachers may not both write a referral for the same behavior, but they will both want punishment for what they write for (8:30)

Q2: Scenario--what more do you want to know?

Is there already a behavior plan? (10:48)

How do we de-escalate the student and what is the trigger (10:48)

Is there an IEP? Is there a behavior plan? How do we restore things? (11:31)

I want to know what has worked and what hasn't worked leading up to this (12:47)

I won't do anything until the kid is de-escalated and the teacher is calmed down (13:57)

If I know it is the teacher that sets the kid off every time, I might do something different (19:53)

Because I don't want the kid to blow out again (19:53)

I will make a plan with the kid, but i don't ask the teacher because I have some that are looking for anything to get the kid out of class (22:12)

If it isn't about the teacher, I have walked that kid back to class after everything is de-escalated. (22:12)

Q4: What would result in a kid being sent home?

Q5: Who do you consult with?

I don't usually call my supervisor because they throw out a bunch of ideas that we have already tried. Not helpful (41:15)

Q6: Pressure to keep a kid or send them?

Its a subtle pressure to keep the kid out, there is a lack of problem solving on the staff (43:19)

Sometimes the teachers can plant a seed with the parents to get them to push to have a kid out of school/class (43:40)

A teacher was telling parents of kids who got hit to complain to me to get the kid out (45:52)

Teachers have the ability to make some things ugly by bringing parents along (47:05)

District response doesn't feel helpful--they just ask us to do more things we have already tried (49:11)

Q7: How does racializing it factor?

Q8: What would you need to end exclusion?

I have teachers that will not own their own triggering behaviors, and they want more severe consequences (1:10:29)

black administrator as consultant (38:27)

Q6: Pressure to keep a kid or send them?

When teachers use parents against other kids, what does that mean for inclusion? (46:26)

Q7: How does racializing it factor? I try to racialize all of it, I am a white dude (51:58)

Who's cultural norms, whose experience is defining how this situation is handled? (52:29)

There was a lot of pressure on us to work in a certain way with a kid, but we were told that we didn't know how to work with this kid or family. He went to another school and they had the same issues we did (53:04)

We were told to just keep doing and doing the same things because he was a black boy (53:54)

As a white leader at a mostly non-white school, I had to reflect on that alot--and I wasn't who the community wanted. I had to check myself alot in the first few years (57:13)

It's like a schoolyard brawl--where some kids are told at home, if someone hits you, hit them back and hit them back hard! (58:17)

If you hit one kid, the whole family is coming next...(59:11)

I think it is a natural consequence that when you hit someone, they turn and hit you back, maybe harder (1:00:38)

As a parent I want to make sure my kid is capable of protecting herself when she is not with me...I grew up that way too (1:01:07)

Parents want to know their kids are safe, and for some kids that means defending yourself (1:04:36)

I think about the kid who doesn't have a strong relationship with the teacher, and I know what is causing the



	<p>behavior. Especially if it is a pattern with other students of color in the past (1:06:01)</p> <p>It also brings up the role of colleagues of color who have relationships, but then they have to do the work the white teacher is supposed to do. (1:06:56)</p> <p>Kids are going to find justice for themselves if they feel that things have been unfair and remain unfair (1:08:14)</p> <p>Our desire to have a book with a list of consequences is the role and presence of whiteness (1:12:46).</p> <p>Being restorative is never going to come from a reference book or toolkit (1:12:46)</p>
<p><b>Loose Coupling Theory</b></p> <p>Q1: What comes up when I say discipline? Process of writing referrals, labeling the behaviors, and outcome by the administrator (4:38)</p> <p>Q2: Scenario--what more do you want to know? It would be me that responds (14:40)</p> <p>I would add the counselor after the kid was calmer (14:48)</p> <p>We would also send whoever has the best relationship, because we know all the kids that do this, we know who has the relationship (15:35)</p> <p>We try to identify the safest person, the person with the relationship (16:00)</p> <p>It is the principal's call to make that decision if the kid is coming back (18:06)</p> <p>There's a lot of judgment about when a kid comes back (19:09)</p> <p>If it is going to be that escalated, I know the room number, its happened before (21:28)</p> <p>If it is peer to peer I have more flexibility to do restorative conversations (24:46)</p> <p>Q4: What would result in a kid being sent home? There are the mandatory things--drugs, weapons (26:04)</p> <p>If it was behavioral, we might need a day or two to call together a team and meet about a plan (26:04)</p>	<p><b>Complexity Theory</b></p> <p>Q1: What comes up when I say discipline? Discipline is way more encompassing that that...staff interactions, routines, decisions (6:00)</p> <p>Q2: Scenario--what more do you want to know? We have to balance meeting the student needs with validating how that impacted the community (12:02)</p> <p>I want to know what is the family situation (13:46)</p> <p>It will feel frustrating for folks because it takes a long time for "something to happen" (16:34)</p> <p>This has been talked about in Contract negotiations (union)--the teacher has the right to refuse letting the student come back to their class (18:06)</p> <p>If the kid is calm, I will ask the teacher if the plan works for them..(19:53)</p> <p>Q4: What would result in a kid being sent home? Can be drama that won't go away (29:03)</p>

<p>Physical fight that wouldn't deescalate (27:38)  When it is really dangerous like a kid had his head cracked open (28:31)  There are times when it becomes trickier to not send a kid home (28:31)  Can be for the kid who is eloping and we have staff chasing him around all day (29:52)  I have seen other schools that have more support and can keep it up for longer (30:35)  Q5: Who do you consult with?  If SpEd, I will consult with the case manager, or another colleague (32:49)  I use my climate specialist, but now I have an AP. I know there is an expectation to call your senior director for suspensions (33:37)  It was to get permission (35:03)  I also consult with [District leader], but I know there is a policy about suspending kids--which is different in California. Here there is a limit to using suspension (35:48)  I used to call [District leader], but not now (37:16)  I agree, I would call [district leader] and she would push back pretty hard to keep the kid in school, but not with [other leader] (37:38)  I do call my supervisor to get their thoughts (37:38)  I haven't had a supervisor that knows how my building operates or has kept tabs on us (40:03)  Q6: Pressure to keep a kid or send them?  It works better when people feel supported (50:35)  Q7: How does racializing it factor?  Q8: What would you need to end exclusion?  I want my staff to want to learn about restorative practices and have time to debrief (1:09:50)  I have some teachers that will own their behaviors and some that will not (1:10:29)  The book is used to tell me what I should be doing to the kid, but it limits the flexibility (1:15:29)</p>	<p>Q5: Who do you consult with?  I got pushback from teachers, but had the policy to back me up when a kid didn't go home (35:48)  Q6: Pressure to keep a kid or send them?  I feel pressure to keep the kid out if the teacher is not in a good space (42:44)  Q7: How does racializing it factor?  Q8: What would you need to end exclusion?  More people. (1:09:34)  I want everyone to know that in a restorative conversation you have to own your part in it (1:11:15)  Need a move away from consequence to response (1:11:34)  Need a shorter day and more people! (1:12:15)  It is not effective if I am running the conversation because the teacher needs to be there to hear it and contribute (1:14:39)  People are hard to get on-board when they don't see accountability and restorative practices linked (1:16:51)  Sometimes teachers are harmed in the process and then they aren't a part of it (1:17:51)  There has to be a critical mass of voices in a school wanting this (1:18:23)  It can be really hard to work with the folks that go to a training and at the end they ask, yea, but what are the consequences...(1:20:17)  There needs to be a critical mass, and that is the work I am supposed to do, but there is a hands off approach to discipline--this is a problem for you to solve (1:21:15)</p>
---	---

## Appendix F: Second Phase Matrix Coding

**Table 5**

**Behaviorism Matrix**

<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
<p>FG1</p> <p>Expectations are taught, reinforced (7:02)</p> <p>Interventions and support (7:50)</p> <p>Behavior Support Plan (13:09)</p> <p>Student removed from others during debrief/de-escalation (19:24)</p> <p>Behavior is not in control of student (20:07)</p> <p>de-escalation cycle can dictate the response (32:32)</p> <p>Teachers asking students to step out, but then the kid leaves (49:50)</p> <p>Kid knows if I kick my teacher I am out of here (1:20:29)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>Behavior is as developmentally appropriate based on age(4:47)</p> <p>They aren't doing it to annoy teachers (4:47)</p> <p>(behavior scenario)what was the antecedent, is it repeated behavior</p> <p>There is the physical mess and the emotional mess (14:45)</p> <p>Depends on how the kid is responding. Are they taking responsibility (15:36)</p> <p>Perception that meeting kid needs is reinforcing wrong behavior (18:43)</p> <p>If you (adult) are mad because I give the kid a fidget and a snack--I'm not giving him a treat, I'm treating him like a 7 year old (25:54)</p> <p>You have to discern if the kid is trying to get an extra break or recess or whatever but then ask the teacher why is that? (32:19)</p> <p>Why is meeting with me more attractive than math or the activity you are doing in class? (32:19)</p> <p>Clear protocol for Kinder, reset time and process. (33:42)</p> <p>We talk about a behavior safety plan, and FBA</p>	<p>FG1:</p> <p>Teacher doesn't want them back in room (20:44)</p> <p>Teachers "need" this kid out of my room (45:49)</p> <p>Some teachers are NO! I don't want them back in my room (46:56)</p> <p>Buddy Classrooms (48:13)</p> <p>Buddy classroom avoids solving the problem (48:36)</p> <p>Classroom community creates a buffer for discipline (K-5 vs. MS) (57:59)</p> <p>Teacher burn out because the response doesn't change the situation (1:09:06)</p> <p>Teachers make systems that work for them, but aren't even known (48:58)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>First thing is to look at adult behaviors and ask what am I reinforcing? (5:50)</p> <p>With relationships I can remind teachers when they were upset and I supported them as well (26:10)</p> <p>We don't write referrals because we will get in trouble (26:34)</p> <p>We set the tone in the beginning of the year and say these things need to be done by the teacher, and by us (31:30)</p> <p>Referral process reinforces bad behaviors (35:48)</p> <p>Provided a script to teachers to indicate if they wanted a break from the kid, or a break from the class to work with the kid (38:21)</p> <p>The teacher also had to get it together and remember they are teaching in a community (39:22)</p> <p>Book study of Beyond Carrots and</p>

<p>before we get there (44:16)  Some of it is predictable--spring soccer with 4th grade boys. Sometimes we have to take a break from soccer (47:18)  Parents have seen their kids in CDL roll around on the floor and still learn, still get the answer correct (1:11:41)  We need to figure out what we are going to do for the wigglers because their parents saw them learn and they aren't going to want them to sit still all day (1:11:41)  FG3  Addressing unexpected behaviors (5:21)  I think it is often punitive, not an opportunity for learning (6:53)  No just how do we punish, but how do we punish enough so it feels equal to what? (7:27)  Is there already a behavior plan? (10:48)  How do we de-escalate the student and what is the trigger (10:48)  Is there an IEP? Is there a behavior plan? How do we restore things? (11:31)  I want to know what has worked and what hasn't worked leading up to this (12:47)</p>	<p>Sticks (Greene)(1:06:05)  Don't give them radios--it makes it too easy to call for help (1:13:35)  FG3  An eye for an eye system where two teachers may not both write a referral for the same behavior, but they will both want punishment for what they write for (8:30)  I won't do anything until the kid is de-escalated and the teacher is calmed down (13:57)  If I know it is the teacher that sets the kid off every time, I might do something different (19:53)  Because I don't want the kid to blow out again (19:53)  I will make a plan with the kid, but i don't ask the teacher because I have some that are looking for anything to get the kid out of class (22:12)  If it isn't about the teacher, I have walked that kid back to class after everything is de-escalated. (22:12)  Its a subtle pressure to keep the kid out, there is a lack of problem solving on the staff (43:19)  Sometimes the teachers can plant a seed with the parents to get them to push to have a kid out of school/class (43:40)  A teacher was telling parents of kids who got hit to complain to me to get the kid out (45:52)  Teachers have the ability to make some things ugly by bringing parents along (47:05)  I have teachers that will not own their own triggering behaviors, and they want more severe consequences (1:10:29)</p>
<p><b>Administrators</b>  FG1  Do we have the ability to do this today? (34:40)  There need to be consequences to reset the culture of a school (53:26)  I wish we had used suspension to make sure the</p>	<p><b>Parents</b>  FG1  Call to parents can result in kid going home (33:35)  Consider the resources and what happens when you call specific parents</p>

<p>kid knew he was out of chances (1:02:32)  District Response Team was not helpful, not called them back ever again (1:08:26)  Need people to sit with the one kid otherwise we don't get anything done. (1:15:00)  FG2  I had a kid who needed me to just stay in the room to help her regulate (17:16)  If we keep offering interventions and they don't work, we can need a break (43:34)  I'm very mindful that if you suspend for the wrong thing you might be in [the papers] (48:26)  It has become more about the numbers than the best practices (55:44)  The district is not putting time or energy into supporting principals who are suspending left and right (57:48)  I'm neither held accountable nor is anyone celebrating that I'm not suspending kids (57:48)  Nobody is calling me to the carpet for the first two years when I was suspending kids left and right (58:40)  FG3  I don't usually call my supervisor because they throw out a bunch of ideas that we have already tried. Not helpful (41:15)  District response doesn't feel helpful--they just ask us to do more things we have already tried (49:11)  (20:29)</p>	<p>(33:58)  No, parents want their kids suspended (55:59)  Reasonable response to behavior (suspension) (57:13)  Mom upset because her kid was at home instead of school, denied the behaviors that resulted in staff harm (59:03)  Mom didn't believe the harm, but there were multiple incidents with scars, harm (1:00:00)  FG2  Have to pay attention to how the kid responds to parent calls, ownership (15:36)  We suspended parents by bringing them in to school (39:22)  There are parents who want to take their kid home right away (14:31)</p>
--	--

**Table 6**

**Critical Race Theory Matrix Compilation**

<p><b>Whiteness</b>  FG1  schools with lots of white privilege lower level behaviors get elevated (30:12)  Of course race and ethnicity play into it (38:56)  Race impacts all decision making, climate, academics, so it isn't limited to discipline (39:29)  Teaches would better engage the students(1:11;15)</p>	<p><b>Staff of color (and lack of)</b>  Staffing creates inequities in schools (36:03)  Impact of district wide systems (36:10)  Kids sent out of room was mostly black boys and girls (45:49)  At middle school we have specific teachers with policies to get a kid out of</p>
--	--

<p>Culturally relevant instruction (1:15:43) FG2 I remember being a white woman in a mostly black and latino school--it was important to be explicit about decisions (53:56) Highly engaging, relevant curriculum, student leadership and empowerment (as opposed to control) and strong interventions(1:04:22) I want to be explicit about my centering kids and students of color, but I don't want to be an annoying equity warrior who talks about it all the time, but picking a few important areas to be explicit. (1:19:46) FG3 I try to racialize all of it, I am a white dude (51:58) Who's cultural norms, whose experience is defining how this situation is handled? (52:29) There was a lot of pressure on us to work in a certain way with a kid, but we were told that we didn't know how to work with this kid or family. He went to another school and they had the same issues we did (53:04) We were told to just keep doing and doing the same things because he was a black boy (53:54) Our desire to have a book with a list of consequences is the role and presence of whiteness (1:12:46) Being restorative is never going to come from a reference book or toolkit (1:12:46)</p>	<p>the room (45:10) FG2 We shifted staffing to build skill over time, which worked with our Equity work (BARWE) (24:29) We have a behavior coach who has great relationships with kids, but then when he brings kids back the teacher is giving the eye like "why are you bringing this kid back to me" (37:40) I feel bad for new administrators of color-they have authority, but also responsibility and autonomy but have to be in compliance with unwritten codes (1:02:19) FG3 Black administrator identified a retired black administrator as consultant (38:27) As a white leader at a mostly non-white school, I had to reflect on that alot--and I wasn't who the community wanted. I had to check myself alot in the first few years (57:13) I think about the kid who doesn't have a strong relationship with the teacher, and I know what is causing the behavior. Especially if it is a pattern with other students of color in the past (1:06:01) It also brings up the role of colleagues of color who have relationships, but then they have to do the work the white teacher is supposed to do. (1:06:56)</p>
<p><b>Historic Racism</b> If student of color vs. white kid, white parents demand kid goes home. If white vs. white, not as much (37:18) Historical elements of racism, classism and inequity leads us to support students (41:42) FG2 It is usually a black boy, and there are teachers who will cite the contract to not have them back (24:29) I don't think anybody who goes into schools to contribute to the school to prison pipeline (57:48)</p>	<p><b>Role of discipline in community</b> FG1 Consistent makes it predictable--which is how we went to no suspensions because we took that outcome away (43:54) Removal of biased outcomes by eliminating the consequence part (44:43) Black parent encouraged suspension and then worked with school--relationship (56:48) FG2 Stronger parent/school relationships. We</p>

<p>We have this racial equity lens and glossy book about graduate portrait and system shifts but we permit (suspensions) by our lack of focus on it. (58:40) FG3 Kids are going to find justice for themselves if they feel that things have been unfair and remain unfair (1:08:14)</p>	<p>aren't going back to pretending you won't talk to a family all year I hope (1:09:59) When teachers use parents against other kids, what does that mean for inclusion? (46:26) It like a schoolyard brawl--where some kids are told at home, if someone hits you, hit them back and hit them back hard! (58:17) If you hit one kid, the whole family is coming next...(59:11) I think it is a natural consequence that when you hit someone, they turn and hit you back, maybe harder (1:00:38) As a parent I want to make sure my kid is capable of protecting herself when she is not with me...I grew up that way too (1:01:07) Parents want to know their kids are safe, and for some kids that means defending yourself (1:04:36)</p>
--	--

Table 7

## Loose Coupling Theory Matix Compilation

<p><b>Staffing</b> FG1 Assign a staff member to be with kid IF there are any people available (16:53) Who helps depends on staffing (18:12) Counselor (18:40) but no subs for counselors (18:44) who works with the student depends on the relationships (23:53) this can impact hiring decisions because an AP can respond but some other work groups won't/can refuse (35:12) Staffing creates inequalities in schools (36:03) District support would be manpower/staff</p>	<p><b>Discipline Definitions/Responses</b> FG1 Definition of discipline: (6:49) Existing structures of support (Check in, circles, zones of regulation) (14:15) Restorative conversation (16:08) (16:30) Talk with class about welcoming kid back in (17:15) A system and process to deescalate (24:57) Building by building is different (27:30) Sending a kid home is an option that invites inconsistency (28:13) Really big behaviors, but that is different</p>
---	--

<p>(1:14;37)  FG2  What is happening to the student in crisis if the teacher and other kids are out of the room (10:40)  I would need to deploy staff to that kid (10:40)  Staffing matches our needs (19:59)  Schools don't have enough support. We had Kinder classes of 29 with no IA support, AP on leave...(21:04)  I hired a TIC (Targeted Intervention Coach) which made a difference (21:42)  Had some flexible FTE to spend because of Equity FTE (22:12)  We deployed whomever has the best relationship with the kid (22:31)  Switched to a Licensed coach instead of TICs to work with teachers (23:35)  We need to dive into this work, but it takes buy in from our staff (1:07:10)  FG3  It would be me that responds (14:40)  I would add the counselor after the kid was calmer (14:48)  We would also send whoever has the best relationship, because we know all the kids that do this, we know who has the relationship (15:35)  We try to identify the safest person, the person with the relationship (16:00)  I have seen other schools that have more support and can keep it up for longer (30:35)</p>	<p>building by building (29:09)  Schools without systems for lower level behaviors send home kids for lesser behaviors (28:36)  Chill out space/sensory circuit (24:57)  Kid got tons of support and avoided suspension for a long time, but then big (one sided fight) which resulted in expulsion (1:02:32)  We just said we weren't going to do this (1:13:45)  Re-entry process and teachers owning their role is not consistent (1:21:41)  FG2  Is the child ready to start cleaning it up? (14:29)  There are parents who want to take their kid home right away (14:31)  The support allows the teacher to NOT do the work (22:52) they just want that kid out of class (22:52)  Using staff to cover classes so the teacher can do the repair (35:48)  We got rid of suspension except when it was really violent and we needed a safety plan (40:47)  Suspension is my very last tool. I make it clear to the staff that we have tried everything else. (44:16)  I feel boxed in by the district or by whats available to us to promise all the kids we cram in a whole bunch of little bodies (44:16)  FG3  Process of writing referrals, labeling the behaviors, and outcome by the administrator (4:38)  If it is going to be that escalated, I know the room number, its happened before (21:28)  Physical fight that wouldn't deescalate (27:38)  When it is really dangerous like a kid had his head cracked open (28:31)  It works better when people feel supported (50:35)</p>
---	--



	<p>I want my staff to want to learn about restorative practices and have time to debrief (1:09:50)</p> <p>I have some teachers that will own their behaviors and some that will not (1:10:29)</p>
<p><b>Laws/Policy implementation</b></p> <p>FG1</p> <p>Contract about discipline (19:35)</p> <p>Principal decides when it is time to go back (24:57)</p> <p>Can't do more than 2 days without talking to Snr. Director (29:09)</p> <p>I'm really glad I work in a system that's not like you have to follow this rule book no matter what happens (41:42)</p> <p>Professional Judgement (41:42)</p> <p>Teachers make policies to kick kids out (45:11)</p> <p>Teachers are told NOT to call the office (51:32)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>Arrived to a system where teachers were told to keep all behaviors in class, no referrals (26:34)</p> <p>Then it shifted to calling all the time, so we had to build in systems slowly. (26:59)</p> <p>One grade was able to implement a soft start which helped a ton, but trying to get it spread to other grades exposed resistance (29:06)</p> <p>When I got here kids were being suspended left and right but it wasn't in the system (39:32)</p> <p>The law changed a few years ago--I don't remember the exact language but it was something like criminally violent. (41:19)</p> <p>Sometimes we tell a family to keep the kid at home because we can't keep him safe. Its not punishment, but safety (42:51)</p> <p>The metrics have shifted from you can't suspend anybody to the union saying you have to (55:44)</p> <p>Mixed messages from our SpEd department about suspensions (59:18)</p> <p>Its not calibrated. Some schools 2 suspensions is a really big deal, others 10 percent of the kids have suspensions (1:00:00)</p> <p>There needs to be more flexibility in our schools. For some kids the routines don't work (1:07:32)</p>	<p><b>Collaboration</b></p> <p>FG1</p> <p>District response isn't helpful because buildings have already tried that solution (1:10:03)</p> <p>Need district support (1:13:45)</p> <p>Other team members in school (1:24:45)</p> <p>Other administrators (1:25:20)</p> <p>Not helpful to call supervisor (1:26:20)</p> <p>Supervisors don't know context (1:27:19)</p> <p>AP (if they are trusted) (1:27:52)</p> <p>Need to partner with AP--will travel to PD with them, be developed together (1:30:08)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>When admin enters situation vs. others is important for relationship building (19:59)</p> <p>(district team for crisis behaviors) was useless (21:42)</p> <p>Some senior leadership didn't know the law (41:49)</p> <p>There are very few opportunities as a leader to be trained in what to do with an escalated 1st grader (45:21)</p> <p>My AP, my administrative team (48:24)</p> <p>Sometimes my senior director, it is year to year based on who it is (48:26)</p> <p>I have had a senior director really question why I haven't been suspending (49:30)</p> <p>That puts me in a tricky spot, like do I ethically move in one way or another (49:55)</p> <p>This is my first year with a senior leader who I trust to be a thought partner and not a judger (50:12)</p>

<p>FG3  It is the principal's call to make that decision if the kid is coming back (18:06)  There's a lot of judgement about when a kid comes back (19:09)  If it is peer to peer I have more flexibility to do restorative conversations (24:46)  There are the mandatory things--drugs, weapons (26:04)  If it was behavioral, we might need a day or two to call together a team and meet about a plan (26:04)  There are times when it becomes trickier to not send a kid home (28:31)  Can be for the kid who is eloping and we have staff chasing him around all day (29:52)  I also consult with [District Leader] , but I know there is a policy about suspending kids--which is different in California. Here there is a limit to using suspension (35:48)  The book is used to tell me what I should be doing to the kid, but it limits the flexibility (1:15:29)</p>	<p>I have some people in the district that I call because I need a thought partner, I forget what is in my toolbox (50:39)  I just need a thought partner, I'm stressed out and I can't keep track of what I know and what I don't know (50:39)  There was a district person years ago that would pull all the discipline people once a month and go through the discipline handbook together to interpret (50:39)  Its important for the district to have professional development for the disciplinarians (52:04)  I had an AP who had never done discipline work and so she avoided it (52:04)  What I am able to do now (after years in the building) is different now (54:33)  A lot of the things we have put in place were despite the district not because of it (56:15)  We noticed lunch recess was a trouble spot and it took stumbling into somebody that was doing it differently (56:15)  Its because we as a building decided, which speaks to the district value, around it (58:40)  Its like benign neglect. You find smart people in a meeting and happen to ask the right question. Its about the informal networks we create rather than the structures that exist (1:00:48)  The district is not putting time or energy into supporting principals who are suspending left and right (57:48)  I'm neither held accountable nor is anyone celebrating that I'm not suspending kids (57:48)  Nobody is calling me to the carpet for the first two years when I was suspending kids left and right (58:40)  Some senior directors want to know everything and some don't want to know anything.(1:02:57)</p>
---	--

	<p>FG3</p> <p>If SpEd, I will consult with the case manager, or another colleague (32:49)</p> <p>I use my climate specialist, but now I have an AP. I know there is an expectation to call your senior director for suspensions (33:37)</p> <p>It was to get permission (35:03)</p> <p>I used to call [district leader], but not now (37:16)</p> <p>I agree, I would call [district leader] and she would push back pretty hard to keep the kid in school, but not with [different leader] (37:38)</p> <p>I do call my supervisor to get their thoughts (37:38)</p> <p>I haven't had a supervisor that knows how my building operates or has kept tabs on us (40:03)</p>
--	--

Table 8

## Complexity Theory Matrix Compilation

<p><b>Complex Relationships</b></p> <p>FG1</p> <p>What is happening for teacher and other students (13:09)</p> <p>Communication with families of kids (16:30)</p> <p>Talk with class, but also teacher (17:50)</p> <p>Teacher has to be consulted with return to class (22:27)</p> <p>Multiple types of conflict--Peer to peer, student to teacher (22:27)</p> <p>Saying we don't suspend kids give them too much power (52:53)</p> <p>Parent doesn't think their kid started it so it shouldn't be their "fault" (57:27)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>Re-entry was a function of specific relationships (18:10)</p> <p>Referrals are about adults, not kids (6:40)</p>	<p><b>Complex Contexts</b></p> <p>FG1</p> <p>Special Education Focus Classrooms (4:30), (5:36)</p> <p>Focus Option School (5:13)</p> <p>Grade level dependent (16:53)</p> <p>Teacher can use the contract to remove student (19:35)</p> <p>Difficult to get consistent support for students in a district with so many inconsistencies (53:54)</p> <p>In order to get to a system, you have to suspend some kids (54:34)</p> <p>Suspension as a tool to reset school culture (54:55)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>Teachers exercise that part of the contract (8:03)</p>
--	---

<p>Is the teacher ready and available to support the kids (11:19)</p> <p>Was the student who was hit targeted or bystander? (12:36)</p> <p>Need to check in with the teacher as well (10:42)</p> <p>You have to have relationships with the teachers to call it out (25:14)</p> <p>It is better when the teachers hold each other accountable call each other out (25:44)</p> <p>It really depends on the kid being ready, or the teacher being ready, or us having the time to process it all (30:43)</p> <p>You need a whole bunch of staff who can problem solve (45:21)</p> <p>We need to be prepared to offer something more than saying we don't know what to do (46:15)</p> <p>I think there are patterns of certain classrooms or certain spaces and how we are providing guidance for teachers (46:15)</p> <p>Other parents want to know what is happening, but with a trusting relationship I need to honor the privacy (53:26)</p> <p>I'm not going to talk about another child with you (53:46)</p> <p>Before we had systems built, I had to be really specific that we weren't suspending for this anymore (54:33)</p> <p>It was really intense...I needed people to share details about what happened so they knew it wasn't just mouthing off in the hallway (55:00)</p> <p>You've got to get to know the kids and parents first. Don't let the staff control the narrative (1:15:49)</p> <p>FG3</p> <p>It will feel frustrating for folks because it takes a long time for "something to happen" (16:34)</p> <p>This has been talked about in Contract negotiations (union)--the teacher has the right to refuse letting the student come back to their class (18:06)</p> <p>If the kid is calm, I will ask the teacher if the plan works for them..(19:53)</p> <p>I got pushback from teachers, but had the policy to back me up when a kid didn't go home (35:48)</p> <p>I feel pressure to keep the kid out if the teacher is not in a good space (42:44)</p>	<p>How old is the student (9:42)</p> <p>What was going on (9:47)</p> <p>Need to think about is the kid OK? What about the other kids in the room? (10:15)</p> <p>Lots of debriefing and getting multiple perspectives (12:54)</p> <p>Slowing down and figuring out what really happened before...(12:54)</p> <p>There is probably more than just what happened in the moment (13:56)</p> <p>Depends on context of kid--a kindergartner maybe has lagging skills, or a 4th grader has been picked on (16:46)</p> <p>People want it to be simple and straightforward like getting a speeding ticket (31:15)</p> <p>The timeline is kid based and can include lots of factors. (34:08)</p> <p>Letting kid voice into the conversation opens up the possibility that it won't "look" the same for all kids (35:40)</p> <p>There is a political piece to this as well (48:26)</p> <p>I'm very mindful that if you suspend for the wrong thing you might be in Oregonlive (48:26)</p> <p>We have to balance meeting the student needs with validating how that impacted the community (12:02)</p> <p>It is not effective if I am running the conversation because the teacher needs to be there to hear it and contribute (1:14:39)</p> <p>People are hard to get on-board when they don't see accountability and restorative practices linked (1:16:51)</p>
--	--

<p>I want everyone to know that in a restorative conversation you have to own your part in it (1:11:15)</p> <p>Sometimes teachers are harmed in the process and then they aren't a part of it (1:17:51)</p> <p>There has to be a critical mass of voices in a school wanting this (1:18:23)</p> <p>It can be really hard to work with the folks that go to a training and at the end they ask, yea, but what are the consequences...(1:20:17)</p> <p>There needs to be a critical mass, and that is the work I am supposed to do, but there is a hands off approach to discipline--this is a problem for you to solve (1:21:15)</p>	
<p><b>Competing Resources</b></p> <p>We don't have enough space or people to keep kids at school (28:36)</p> <p>Depends on the time of day because of the resources and the amount of time remaining to supervise the student (32:01)</p> <p>Classrooms are pretty standard, there aren't many options (1:23:10)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>What tools are provided to me as well (as the leader) and supported (45:21)</p> <p>This was always like intentional goals in my school improvement plan (55:00)</p> <p>If we are going to actually build capacity to meet kids where they are, we need training for that but they just show us the data and shame us (55:44)</p> <p>The PD we get is just silly being run by people who have never been principals. Its like they are nervous to put us in a room together to dialogue (1:01:20)</p> <p>More people. (1:09:34)</p> <p>Need a shorter day and more people! (1:12:15)</p>	<p><b>Complex role of discipline in Education System</b></p> <p>FG1</p> <p>Consider the needs of the student, are they hungry (13:37)</p> <p>Safety (15:02) of students</p> <p>Shift in school culture when equity became infused in daily experience instead of a set aside time (40:43)</p> <p>Suspension for support from district when all other tools have been exhausted (1:06:49)</p> <p>Use of Suspension as a tool to demonstrate a need for support (1:03:06)</p> <p>Suspension as advocacy (1:03:54)</p> <p>Suspension as a way to get the district to pay attention to a kid (1:03:54)</p> <p>Neet training on Mental health, Trauma Informed care (1:11:48)</p> <p>Suspension is the tool we have, but there needs to be a deeper response option (1:18)</p> <p>Mental Health days provided by parents, but some have to send their kid to school no matter what (1:19:13)</p> <p>We are mental health providers (1:24:00)</p> <p>FG2</p> <p>Discipline is a blanket thrown over all this other stuff in education (6:40)</p> <p>Kid's needs could be varied--time with an adult, time to clean it up, maybe need to</p>

	<p>figure some stuff out (14:47)</p> <p>Systems need time to get established so that when a call comes in we know it is real serious (27:26)</p> <p>Sometimes our reaction to student behavior is also a symptom of what we are dealing with as a system (45:21)</p> <p>I worry about new administrators. How do they make heads or tails about any of this. Its happenstance, not systemic (1:00:00)</p> <p>We have to break down this single idea of how you do school (1:07:32)</p> <p>How do we address the kids that coming to school is trauma? (1:08:39)</p> <p>Sometimes I send a kid home because the school is the toxin (1:09:17)</p> <p>I would be even more explicit when I am putting the needs of the kids ahead of the adults so it would be more quick for them to see it (1:18:29)</p> <p>SpEd department needs to see severe behaviors AND severe responses (suspension) to move on some kids (59:30)</p> <p>FG3</p> <p>Discipline is way more encompassing that that...staff interactions, routines, decisions (6:00)</p> <p>I want to know what is the family situation (13:46)</p> <p>Can be drama that won't go away (29:03)</p> <p>Need a move away from consequence to response (1:11:34)</p>
--	--