

“BUT WHY DON’T YOU JUST SUSPEND HIM?”  
STUDENT AND CAREGIVER PERSPECTIVES ON DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN A  
PREDOMINANTLY AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

AN ABSTRACT

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN PSYCHOLOGY

BY



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## **Abstract**

The word ‘discipline’ is used to mean either the punishment following disobedience or training in self-control, and schools use both methods when responding to student misbehavior. Currently, we do not know how elementary-age students and their families feel about both types of experiences, and which discipline practices they think ought to be changed or retained by their school. Using ecological and critical race theory frameworks, this phenomenological study aimed to listen to stakeholder voices to understand how students and caregivers experience school discipline practices in order to help determine culturally valid and ecologically sound disciplinary interventions in the future. Focus groups were conducted with 22 students and 14 caregivers at a public charter elementary school serving primarily African American students. The sample included participants whose experiences with school discipline practices ranged from those who have never received an office discipline referral to those who have received over 75 in one year, and a corresponding group of caregivers. Responses were analyzed inductively. Themes were grouped into three main dilemmas that the stakeholders are facing with regard to school discipline: the appropriate roles for school and family, the type of consequence to use, and how time should be allocated for different types of disciplinary responses. These findings highlight the complexity of school discipline beyond simple behavioral contingencies and reflect a need for continued collaboration between the school, students, and caregivers to co-create context-specific discipline policies and procedures.

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## **Introduction**

As adults, we often do things to or for children rather than with children. As school personnel, we tend to do things to or for families rather than with families. Time constraints, ease of decision-making, and avoidance of conflict are all factors that may contribute to these practices, but they do not alter the fact that for any school program to work long term, relevant stakeholders must be invested (Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas, 2004). Though traditional school discipline is something that is exclusively done “to” students without their input, discipline practices are still not exempt from the benefits of stakeholder investment. Researchers recommend that a school have at least 80 percent of staff buy-in for effective implementation of initiatives (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016), but little is known regarding the role buy-in from other important stakeholders such as students or primary caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents, foster parents, etc.) may play in the implementation of disciplinary practices. By excluding the perceptions and voices of these stakeholders, researchers risk giving practitioners a myopic understanding of what steps must be taken to ensure the successful implementation of a disciplinary strategy.

Academic literature is rich with studies that demonstrate the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline practices in schools and the history of discrimination in discipline along race, gender, and SES lines, starting at the prekindergarten level (e.g., Barrett, McEachin, Mills, & Valant, 2017; Finn & Servoss, 2013; Noguera, 2008). While there is an increasing body of literature supporting alternative, restorative practices rather than

exclusion, high suspension rates persist in schools (Allman & Slate, 2011). This discrepancy may stem from a lack of widespread acceptability for alternatives. Perceptions of all practices, exclusionary and restorative, are linked to stakeholder acceptability (Nastasi et al., 2004). Acceptability is crucial for the success of interventions of any kind. A lack thereof will likely mean that practices advocated in an intervention will not be adopted, implemented, or effective (Eckert & Hintze, 2000). To determine what non-exclusionary disciplinary practices will work in schools, primary caregivers and students must buy in to their effectiveness relative to traditional detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. Their voices must be included prior to adoption.

One way to ensure perspectives are heard is to include stakeholders in the design of effective discipline systems in schools. A Critical Race Theory perspective puts forth that schools and the practices therein are a type of property that has historically been owned and controlled by White Americans (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The move towards participatory research and collaborative decision-making in public schools is one way to combat the perpetuation of such ownership. Another step towards more socially-just educational practices is to listen to the voices of racial and ethnic minority students and caregivers to understand how these stakeholder groups experience the discipline practices currently being implemented at their school. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), children should have opportunities to express themselves and to be involved in decision-making that concerns them (Nastasi, 2014).

This study uses a phenomenological approach because it is a form of deep learning that can be transformative for the participants, the study site, and the researcher



(Creswell & Poth, 2017). A qualitative phenomenological approach is a way to gather information while simultaneously empowering stakeholders to voice their thoughts, feelings, and preferences when it comes to school discipline. In doing so, it can “... elucidate or make explicit our understanding of human behaviours [sic] and actions” (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 244) and include social justice goals of bringing suppressed voices to the forefront of policy-making. This study aims to understand and communicate the experiences of African American students and caregivers so that they can inform development of effective practices and policies in schools. Involving stakeholder voices in school decision-making not only empowers often excluded groups, but also has the potential to change ineffective or poorly implemented discipline to culturally-relevant and sustainable practices that will lead to improved outcomes for children in schools.

A public charter school in the urban south is the ideal setting for this research given the historical legacies of control of Black bodies in these localities, and that currently many such schools have over 90 percent African American students, taught by a majority White American teaching force (Recovery School District [RSD] & Orleans Parish School Board [OPSB], 2017). Charter schools also have more autonomy over disciplinary systems and practices than traditional school districts. This means that their systems may vary from high rates of exclusion to non-exclusion policies, or a possible mix of both restorative and exclusionary practices. Because of this, it is likely that the results will include stakeholder perspectives on the range of practices, and therefore provide more comprehensive data that can be used to improve current discipline systems. In addition, most public charter schools in the city setting for this study serve predominantly African American students who receive free and reduced meals (a proxy

for socioeconomic status; RSD & OPSB, 2017), a demographic that is often subject to intersecting systems of oppression related to historical forces and facing disproportionate exclusionary discipline.

The research team analyzed archival data from focus groups and semi-structured follow-up interviews with students and caregivers conducted as a part of a larger school consultation partnership. The data include student and caregiver perceptions of their experiences with current school discipline practices and ideas for future practices. Transcriptions of the interviews coded inductively based on themes that arose from the participants themselves.

### **Problem Statement**

We know that many exclusionary discipline practices negatively affect young students, families, and their teachers, and that restorative and skill-building practices are supposed to have positive impacts. What we do not know is how elementary-age students and their families feel about these types of experiences, and which discipline practices they think ought to be changed or retained by the school.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how students and primary caregivers experience school discipline practices at a public charter elementary school (PCES) in the Southern United States, serving primarily African American students. In this study, discipline practices were defined as the adult responses to student behavioral infractions or violations of adult expectations for student behavior. While the results of this study are specific to this school site, it is hoped that the process of

conducting and analyzing focus group data with young children and their caregivers can provide a blueprint for how to replicate the process in similar settings.

### **Research Question**

The proposed study aims to answer the following question at a specific school site:

*How do students and caregivers perceive the discipline practices used in their school?*

### **Theoretical Framework**

The impetus for this study comes from the principles of Critical Race Theory of Education, Ecological Systems Theory, and the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory. Recent work has focused specifically on integrating these theories, describing how Critical Race Theory focuses on the exploration of racial identity-based experiences, and the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory serves to organize and interpret those experiences as indicators of risk or supports (Spencer, 2017). The integration of such legal, social, and developmental theories highlights the importance of the role that perceptions of experiences can play in creating social change. These three theories serve as an important part of the rationale for the importance of researching stakeholder perceptions of discipline in a predominantly African American school.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) apply key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the field of education. Their discussion of race as a salient issue in schools relates to the fact that though African American students make up a minority of the United States population as a whole, they represent a majority in the largest public-school systems in the country (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The relevance of race in stakeholder

experiences cannot be ignored, especially given that most of the positions of power in school sites in some urban districts are held by White American teachers (RSD & OPSB, 2017). The second point of CRT applied to education is that United States society is based on property rights, which includes not only a discussion of the inequity of property taxes that pay for public schooling, but also the idea of curricula as property, and the right to access rich and varying learning experiences within schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the context of this study, discipline policies and practices can be seen as a type of learning experience, one that has been shown to differ dramatically based on the race of the student (Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, & Marshall, 2014). One way to determine if the students and families at schools have access to practices that they deem high-quality is to first identify what those experiences are and how they are perceived. Studies that seek to illuminate these perspectives provide African American children and caregivers the opportunity to tell their stories about school discipline and to be heard. These stories can also be a chance for counter-storytelling, or the telling of stories about themselves that challenge others' perceptions of them, their behaviors, and their racial group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the importance of various levels of context in the life of a child. The theory describes the child at the center, surrounded by the immediate influences of family, classroom, and peers, which make up the microsystem. The next layer of influence is the exosystem, comprised of the structures that profoundly influence the individual, but indirectly, such as a parent or partner's workplace. The outer layer, or macrosystem, is made up of larger cultural institutions, such as the government, media, and ethical codes that reflect the norms and

values of this context. Each layer or system interacts with the others through what is called the mesosystem. The contexts surrounding the individual at all levels influence the development, daily life, and health of the child, and the influence can be reciprocal. These systems and interactions are also bound by the time in history in which they exist, known as the chronosystem. Ecological Systems Theory acknowledges that individual influence and are influenced by institutions and individuals outside of themselves. In the context of school discipline, the values of a family may differ from the values emphasized at the school, both of which may be influenced by cultural expectations held at a larger societal level. Additionally, strict school discipline policies existing in the exosystem may reflect norms typically associated with prison systems in the larger macrosystem. Professionals need to be able to integrate the different perspectives, values, and cultures of the systems surrounding children and help them make sense of them together.

Spencer's (1995) work adds the Phenomenological Variant to traditional Ecological Systems Theory, which incorporates the idea that an individual's experience within the different systems in their life influences how they perceive, or make meaning of, themselves. Each experience is also viewed as it relates to a balance of risk and resilience factors in the individual's life. This is particularly relevant for this study, as it seeks to understand student and caregiver perceptions of their experiences with school discipline. Each person has had varying experiences with school discipline, either at their current school, a previous school, or through their child, if they are a parent. These experiences have been shaped by many aspects of their lives, including relationships with school personnel, encounters with other systems of rules (such as the criminal justice

system), and perceptions of fairness in the larger community and system. This study also seeks to take a strengths-based approach by considering the many resilient factors reflected in both student and caregiver experiences.

### **Literature Review**

The intent of this review is to collect the published information presenting the perspectives of African American elementary school students and parents on school discipline. I conducted searches of various databases of academic journal articles relevant to psychology and education using the terms “discipline,” “perspectives,” “experiences,” “perceptions,” “exclusionary,” “suspensions,” “office discipline referral,” “restorative,” “elementary,” “race,” “school,” “parent,” “student,” and “qualitative” revealed that there are hundreds of studies indicating the racial disproportionality of exclusionary discipline practices, as well as many outlining the ineffectiveness of such practices as suspension and expulsion. Very few studies, however, provide direct accounts of student or parent perceptions on discipline, either qualitative or quantitative, and even fewer study the elementary school level. For this reason, studies that directly asked any school-age children or caregivers of school-age children how they perceive school discipline practices, through any method (e.g., surveys, interviews, or focus groups) are included in this review. Twenty-two studies met criteria for inclusion. In these studies, researchers aimed to understand how these stakeholders experienced discipline personally, or how they viewed discipline practices at school more generally. Many studies refer to different types of disciplinary practices, ranging from exclusionary to inclusionary. The sections that follow present relevant information regarding the definitions of disciplinary

practices, an analysis of research on student and parent perspectives that has been done, and implications for the present study.

### **Exclusionary Discipline**

dis·ci·pline

'disəplən/

1: to punish or penalize for the sake of enforcing obedience and perfecting moral character.

2: to train or develop by instruction and exercise especially in self-control. (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

School staff can take many actions when a student violates expectations for behavior. As seen in the dichotomous definition by Merriam-Webster (2017), whether these responses are punitive or instructive in nature, they are referred to as discipline. While most educational research does not define the broader term, in practice, discipline traditionally refers to a “system of punishments” that may follow a behavioral infraction (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016). Though exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, have been used in schools since the 1960s, they have specifically been the focus of many studies since the late 1980s, when researchers began to note that behaviors were not improving after implementation of such methods (Allman & Slate, 2011). The plethora of data show that exclusionary discipline does not lead to significant or long-term behavior change, yet it is still widely used in schools today, and disproportionately impacts students of color (e.g., Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016)

**Definition.** *Exclusionary discipline* encompasses responses to student behavior that remove the student from the learning environment (Barrett et al., 2017). Common

practices include sending the student out of the classroom or to “the office” for an unspecified amount of time (known as an office discipline referral, or ODR), requiring that the student remain in a separate room in the school for a specified number of school days (in-school suspension, or ISS), prohibiting the student from attending school for a specified number of days (out of school suspension, or OSS), and prohibiting the student from attending the school at all in the future (expulsion; Blomberg, 2004; Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). These four responses are all referred to as exclusionary discipline, though they represent a wide continuum of intensity. This can make it difficult to discern the specific impacts of each practice within the research. Findings that exclusionary discipline practices lead to negative student outcomes are often referring to suspensions and expulsions. Few studies examine the effectiveness of ODRs themselves (though they may be lumped into the term exclusionary discipline) and instead, ODR frequency data are often used as an outcome measure for the effectiveness of other interventions (Hawkins, McLeod, & Rawlings, 2007).

**Effectiveness.** Schools in the United States continue to rely on exclusionary discipline practices to address what school personnel perceive as inappropriate or maladaptive behavior in the classroom (Barrett et al., 2017). Many studies have shown that these practices are ineffective ways to change student behavior, and they can actually lead to adverse outcomes, such as encounters with the criminal justice system, especially for African American students (e.g., Fowler, 2011; Noguera, 2008). While exclusionary practices are the most common forms of discipline in American schools, they disproportionately affect students of color (Gibson et al., 2014; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2013; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). If students are removed from the classroom for



behavior infractions, they are not able to access the curriculum being taught in those classrooms, thus resulting in what could be deemed the denial of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that is guaranteed by law (GovTrack, 2018).

Much research on school discipline practices focuses on either suspensions or what tactics are being used in the classroom and whether or not they are effective. Effectiveness is often measured quantitatively, by whether the number of office discipline referrals for students changes after the implementation of a new method. The practices used in the office itself are relegated to outcome-variable status, and the implications of what occurs there are lost (Hawken, MacLeod, & Rawlings, 2007). The underlying assumption here is that office discipline referrals will be occurring, at some rate, even under the best of conditions. If this is the case, it is imperative that educators and researchers begin to understand what “going to the office” really means, what happens to students there, and how they perceive the experience.

Understanding what practices are employed once a student is in the office allows this to become a site for intervention. While suspensions are ineffective at best and detrimental at worst, and practices such as School-wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBIS) may be implemented to help prevent undesired behavior in classrooms (Sugai & Horner, 2002), researchers and educators need to look at what practices are employed when students are sent to the office, and how students perceive these practices.

### **Alternatives to Exclusion**

Schools often use the frequency of exclusionary discipline referrals (ODRs and suspensions) as outcome data to determine the effectiveness of preventive programs such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, but they do not describe

what is done *in the office* for those receiving the referrals that still do occur (Hawken, MacLeod, & Rawlings, 2007). Alternatives to suspension, such as restorative practices and mindful reflection have also received attention in recent years, but studies show that the majority of teachers and parents still support harsh exclusionary practices (e.g., “zero tolerance” policies Way, 2011). Understanding these stakeholder perspectives is key to identifying what discipline practices will work in schools and how to implement them sustainably (Nastasi et al., 2004). Most importantly, the perspectives of students themselves are often left out (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2013).

### **Perspectives on Discipline**

Everyone either is, or has been, a child, and therefore likely has a lived experience of being disciplined by an adult. This results in a myriad of different perspectives on discipline in schools, ranging from children who grew up to be policy makers and theorists to parents and students, and varying combinations of these roles. Understanding what these perspectives are and how they interact and change over time is key to creating an effective system.

In the 1990s, attitudes of staff in some schools in the United States were shifting away from OSS to a potentially more rehabilitative process of ISS (Blomberg, 2003). After the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, however, parents, teachers, and policy makers actually pushed for stricter discipline policies in schools (Blomberg, 2003; Way, 2011). Though this school shooting was carried out by two White students, the resulting policies have had disproportionately affected African American students (Blomberg, 2003). A Public Agenda study in 2004 found that most teachers and parents supported zero tolerance policies in schools, despite

the abundance of evidence that it was ineffective. While these studies provide some information on stakeholder perspectives, more qualitative investigation is needed so that students can tell their own stories of experiences with harsh discipline practices to allow for the possibility of counter-story telling, or challenging the accepted premise of zero tolerance discipline (Gibson et al., 2014).

Defiance theory also suggests the importance of student perceptions of discipline. When students experience discipline as unfair or illegitimate, noncompliance is likely to increase (Tyler, 1990). This extends to student perceptions of teachers or disciplinarians as authority figures. In a study with a sample including 10 percent Hispanic and 9 percent African American students, Way (2011) found that the more severe the punishment policy of the school, the more classroom disruptions increase. This only occurs, however, for students who perceive the school to have less legitimate or illegitimate authority, providing yet another rationale for the importance of understanding student perspectives.

**Student perspectives.** Though rare, some studies have sought to directly understand student perspectives on behavior and discipline in schools. Of the twenty-two studies that met these criteria, thirteen did so by analyzing interviews with students, five used surveys, one looked at focus groups, one conducted both interviews and focus groups, and two used a combination of surveys and either interviews or focus groups. The findings can be grouped into two major themes: what students perceive causes their behavior or punishment, and how they perceive the ways that the adults at school approach discipline. The voices of younger children, however, are noticeably absent. Researchers seem to be waiting for adolescence before inquiring about lived experiences of discipline and ignoring the potential for elementary-age children's voices to change

school policy. The reasons for the omission of younger voices are not clear but could be due to an assumption that elementary students are not able to articulate their experiences, or a thought that exclusionary discipline is more prevalent in middle and high schools. Research has shown that neither of these things are true, however. Children as young as three can remember and express their perceptions of experiences after the development of their own self-concept, which occurs at approximately 22 months (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Additionally, the grade with the highest number of expulsions is not in secondary school, but is actually prekindergarten (Gilliam, 2016).

Eccles (1999) terms the developmental period of children ages 6 through 10 as middle childhood, which encompasses most of elementary school. During middle childhood children begin to have more experiences outside of their families, which are heterogeneous in age, and spend extensive time in classrooms, which are homogenous in age. This facilitates the development of social comparison and identity formation based on their own performance and personalities, versus referential identities, which are assigned to them at birth (e.g., son, sister; Eccles, 1999). Children in this period start to form more consistent patterns of responses to specific types of situations and can form judgments on their own actions as well as those of others (Eccles, 1999), including authority figures like teachers and disciplinarians. This means that elementary school children are certainly capable of understanding their own and peers' experiences with school discipline. And though consistency of responses in research may be lower for younger children, they have been shown to be just as accurate as those of older children, even at age 3 (Steward & Steward, 1996).

***Causes of behavior or exclusion.*** In certain studies, students expressed potential reasoning underlying their actions of both rule-abiding and rule-defying behavior at school, as well as what they perceived to cause them to receive exclusion as a punishment. The themes that arose are described below.

*Self-defense.* Appearing across studies was the perception that the students broke the “no fighting” rules in situations of self-defense. Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015) interviewed African American women under twenty-five about their school experiences and one woman described being suspended for physically defending herself against a peer. African American and mixed race middle school students from Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy’s (2016) study echoed this sentiment. High school students reported as being of African, African American, Asian, Latino, Mexican, and European American heritages interviewed by Thorson (1996) shared similar experiences, expressing that they felt they had to fight to defend themselves from others, but this often led to exclusion as punishment. It is not clear how younger children perceive discipline in occasions of self-defense. Given the frequency of discipline incidents in elementary schools, however, they are likely at least witnessing self-defense if not experiencing it themselves or hearing about it from an older sibling at home. Elementary students are also experiencing more freedom and independence than they had in preschool environments, and this is combined with an increase in the expectation that they are able to control their own emotions and actions (Eccles, 1999). Given this developmental context, it is probable that young students would try to engage in physical self-defense if provoked and thus be punished, but they need an opportunity to share their experiences in order for adults in their lives to know this.

Though the Crenshaw et al. (2015) interviewees did not specify any elementary experiences specifically, even if they had, they would have been retrospective.

Understanding this phenomenon from the eyes of young children for whom it is occurring right now could help schools to address current issues with a greater sense of urgency.

*Resentment.* Students, particularly the participants in special education programs, also identified anger and resentment against a perceived poor quality of instruction as a reason for misbehavior, and described being bored in class because teachers just handed out work and told them to “do it” (Thorson, 1996). Thorson’s (1996) classroom observations of a racially and ethnically diverse sample of high school students supported this claim, noting that teachers with engaging and clear lessons had few discipline incidents. Resentment against teachers and staff was also described by a participant in the Crenshaw et al. (2015) study. A woman recalled being so frustrated that a counselor would not listen to her when she was trying to disclose being a victim of sexual assault that “it all boiled up” and she hit a staff member (p. 39). Another student in the Thorson interviews revealed that he acted out in class because of a perceived inevitability of being punished regardless of his actions. He stated, “I figure if I’m going to get in trouble, I’m gonna annoy him [the teacher] as much as I can” (Thorson, 1996, p. 6). Resentment may look different at younger developmental levels, but still may be present. Although engaging lessons and acting out as retaliation could occur at any age, this will remain unconfirmed until research with elementary students is conducted.

*Family influence.* Students in both the Williams and Bryan (2012) and Thorson (1996) studies identified wanting to please their families as reason to follow the rules and

avoid disciplinary action at school. Interestingly, three-quarters of the African American men in the Williams and Bryan focus groups perceived physical discipline (e.g., spankings) from their parents for school behavioral infractions as communication that education was important and said that it motivated them to achieve in school. Students in the Thorson (1996) study described wanting to please their parents, and therefore, did their best to behave in school. Due to lower levels of independence, elementary students may have even more direct interaction with families regarding school discipline. Elementary school discipline policies at PCES include phone calls home for every ODR received, but how students and families perceive this is largely unknown.

*Bias.* Students perceived receiving disciplinary action because of teacher or administrator bias on the basis of gender, class, and especially, race. An African American adolescent female noted, “If a girl does the same exact thing [as a boy] they are sent to the office right away and they miss out on whatever was happening in that class” (Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 33). In discussing the intersection of gender and race, participants in the same study concluded that some girls of color may be perceived as “defiant” when expressing themselves in ways that are culturally different from how White teachers may expect. With regard to socio-economic status, Brantlinger (1991) found that both high- and low-income high school students perceived that schools unfairly disciplined low-income students with greater frequency. In qualitative interviews done with ethnically diverse high school students by Phelan, Cao, and Davidson (1992), a student described being yelled at, ignored, and unfairly excluded based on an initial judgment because he had not taken a history class at a previous school where it had not been available to him. Elementary school students have not yet had the opportunity to

formally express their views on bias in school discipline, as reflected in available research. Developmentally, children in elementary school are beginning to have more experiences with adults outside of their family (e.g., teachers) and are able to then compare how different adults respond to both their behavior and that of their peers (Eccles, 1999). Thus, their perspectives would add to the understanding of bias in discipline throughout the span of schooling (k-12).

Multiple studies found that students of color perceive racial bias when disciplined by a White teacher or staff member, especially when that person does not listen to the student's point of view (Davidson, 1992; Phelan et al., 1992). Students also acknowledged that there is some ambiguity in teacher bias. A high school student from California perceived most White teachers as "kind of prejudiced" based on the way they look at students of color when discussing issues such as dropping out or teenage pregnancy. She also mentioned that while she perceives this as prejudice, she sometimes thinks the teacher is "trying to help us" (Phelan et al., 1992, p. 25). Another student from this study talked about a teacher labeling different groups as "non-workers," "talkers" and "workers," corresponding with their race or ethnicity (p. 25). Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, and Marshall (2014) interviewed 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders at a school that is eighty percent students of color. They found that students perceive that teachers ask White students to explain all of the details surrounding an incident, but students of color are thought to be lying, even when they tell the truth, thus resulting in suspensions from school.

*Reputation.* Once school personnel have formed perceptions of students, the students find it very difficult to change those images, and disciplinary actions are



perceived to occur along those lines. Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy (2016) described the perceptions of students who are frequent recipients of exclusionary discipline. They voiced that administrators seem to subjectively apply disciplinary actions based on how they perceive the students' behaviors in the past. Part of the reasoning for this may lie in school systems: while there is frequently a process for documenting ODRs and suspensions, there is less often a system for recording positive behaviors or student successes to counter that narrative (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016), despite some within systems such as SWPBIS. Another student was expelled, and she perceived that because of an out-of-school arrest, the school decided she was a "threat to other kids" (Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 35). Nicholl (2007) interviewed students in the United Kingdom, where they discussed the permanence of such reputations. One student felt that "you have to be good from the beginning," while another noted, "there's no chance to redeem yourself," and a third student described, "you get a reputation for yourself as a trouble causer and you can't lose it" (Nicholl, 2007, pp. 267-75).

***School staff approach.*** In the reviewed studies, results often included student perceptions of the approach taken by their teachers, or other school staff, when addressing behavior at school. In a survey of 712 students of unreported race or ethnicity in 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grades in suburban Indiana, Chiu and Tulley (1997) found that, generally, students prefer a confronting-contracting approach to discipline in schools. This approach relies heavily on teacher interaction with students and joint problem solving between both adults and children. Survey methods preclude a greater understanding of why the students have this preference, and what attributes they perceive to make it more effective. More specific themes of approach are discussed below.

*Authority.* Way (2011) conducted a quantitative study with a predominantly White sample looking at the relationship between classroom disruptions and student perceptions of their teachers' authority as legitimate or illegitimate. Students with lower authority scores for their teachers demonstrated significantly more classroom disruptions as the discipline policies became stricter at the school. Student issues with teacher authority, be it with the legitimacy of their role or discomfort with displays of power or lack thereof, arose in multiple studies reviewed.

Students spoke about manifestations of authority outside of interpersonal actions. African American women in the Crenshaw et al., (2015) study reported feeling so intimidated by metal detectors that they did not want to go to school. Additionally, lack of an authoritative presence, an uncontrolled environment, and passive teacher approaches were a concern. High school students in England and the United States perceived it as the responsibility of the teacher to maintain control in the classroom, and some even called for more disciplinary action in order to do so (Pomeroy, 1999; Thorson, 1996). When students perceived unsafe school environments, they feared for their bodies as well as exclusionary punishment if they were to defend themselves against an aggressor. These same students described a desire to learn other ways to deal with conflict but had not received any instruction or intervention at school (Crenshaw et al., 2015). For elementary students, it may be more expected for teachers to "maintain control," given the general understanding that young children are still developing social skills. Their own interpretations of this and potential desire for learning social skills, however, are absent from the literature.

*Listening.* Students yearn to be listened to by the adults in their lives. Adolescents cited times when they felt heard by teachers as positive experiences at school, and times when they were ignored or felt their stories were dismissed as reasons for negative disciplinary occurrences. Phelan et al. (1992) heard high school students report that when a school staff member was willing to listen to them, they became less angry and their resentment dissipated, allowing for a more productive resolution to the problem. Some students also discussed their desire for school personnel to approach disciplinary issues by trying to understand the greater context of the situation before making decisions, an act that would require asking questions and listening to the responses (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Student descriptions of what would occur or had occurred in the past often highlighted their perceptions of not being heard. The only report with direct quotes from primarily elementary students contained three student descriptions of times when they had done something by accident but had received an immediate punishment without being allowed to explain the situation (Demetriou & Hopper, 2007). These same students suggested that teachers approach situations by talking to people before applying consequences.

Thorson (1996) interviewed a high school student who recounted a time that he got in trouble for not following directions, when he says he did not understand what the teacher meant by the instruction given. Another student said that they were suspended for two days because of a misunderstanding when the teacher perceived something as being directed at her, when the student claims to have been directing it at a classmate (Thorson, 1996). Here it is clear that elementary students and high school students share some disciplinary experiences. Further investigation into commonalities and differences could

help schools design developmentally appropriate discipline procedures. Elementary-age students are capable of providing advice, but they need to be given the opportunity to do so. Advice that high school students gave in studies included suggestions like, “listen to both sides of the story...and then come to a conclusion” and “don’t always jump to believe the teacher, listen to the student, too, cuz [sic] they’re people too,” (Pomeroy, 1999, p. 473; Thorson, 1996, p. 9). Feelings of not being heard led to a perception that getting in trouble was inevitable once an adult decided disciplinary action was necessary: “if you go to the office to see him [about getting in trouble]...ain’t no way you’re going to talk to him about getting out of it...even if you didn’t do anything wrong, what the teacher says goes” (Davidson, 1992, p. 441). Another student shared the perception that the effort to explain was futile: “when we’re talking, it’s just like we’re talking to hear ourselves talk, there’s not nobody listening” (Thorson, 1996, p. 9).

*Fairness.* Closely tied to approaches that include listening, is the concept of fairness. Both quantitative and qualitative studies look at this issue. In a survey of 1,763 students (identified by the authors as 34 percent White, 26 percent Asian, 12 percent Black, 8 percent Latino, and 20 percent “other”) from ten high schools in Seattle, Wald and Kurleander (2003) found that over forty percent of students either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, “My teachers administer punishment fairly.” When disaggregated by race, African American, Latinx, and students from other minority groups disagreed with this statement at a significantly higher rate than White and Asian students. There was a greater difference, however, between students from different schools. This could be due to general differences in school climate, or in the approaches used by personnel at each school (Wald & Kurleander, 2003). Qualitative methods could

help to illuminate the reasons for these ratings. Interview data collected by Vavrus and Cole (2002) at a high school in the Midwest (identified by the authors as having a student body that is 60 percent Hispanic, 20 percent African American, 10 percent White, 8 percent Asian, and 2 percent Native American) described a typical situation at the school, where teachers become frustrated with the whole class and then the last person to say something is the recipient of exclusion. Though the student seemed to understand the build-up to this moment, he still perceived it as unfair. Demetriou and Hopper (2007) sought to understand the developmental levels at which children understood fairness. They found that students age six to ten were able to label many incidents as unfair, but they were still working to distinguish when something was unfair because it was morally unfair, or if they simply did not get what they wanted (e.g., a dessert). This has implications for elementary school discipline practices, where children may need assistance teasing out fair consequences from unpleasant emotions.

*Effectiveness.* High school students in California expressed a belief that in-school exclusionary practices were effective in preventing them from breaking rules again (Thorson, 1996). They described the lack of entertainment and stimuli in a detention room as a deterrent. Another student compared it to jail, but “not a bad one;” he used it as a place to reflect and “learn your lesson” (Thorson, 1996, p. 4). Yet another found detention punishing and motivated him to improve his behavior, but the author provided details that many of these students are regularly in detention. So, despite their perceptions of effective punishment, a consequence is only punishment if it reduces the likelihood of the behavior occurring again (Miltnerberger, 2008). This concept was described perfectly by another student in the study: “if it would have had an effect, then nobody would be

here the second time” (Thorson, 1996, p. 4). This mix of student views on effectiveness was not unique to this study. Pomeroy (1999) found that about half of the sample were indifferent to their exclusion, while the other half experienced distress. Bear, Manning, and Shiomi (2006) noted that 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children in the U.S. tend to focus on punishment and rules when compared with children in Japan. This may be due to the frequency with which they encounter punishment in their school environment, and thus familiarity could be taken for effectiveness. It may also be an effect of developmental level, given that the sample was comprised of elementary students. Eccles (1999) describes that “Under usual circumstances in the American culture, children come to conclude that failure is an indication of their incompetence, not a condition that can be modified by learning or practice” (p. 36). With this in mind, elementary students may perceive a punishment as effective because of their own guilt that resulted, not based on whether it precluded them from repeating the infraction. This would match Erikson’s theory of development that places children ages 7 to 11 in the stage of “industry vs. inferiority,” with elementary children who experience exclusionary discipline potentially developing a “sense of inferiority” (Erikson, 1968).

Understanding that some student’s perceptions of effectiveness may not match reality, however, is important when communicating consequences to students. If they perceive exclusion to be effective, they may be less likely to accept alternative discipline. This may differ across age levels, but an investigation into elementary student perceptions of effectiveness is necessary to determine this.

*Relationships.* Perhaps most salient to students, whether in reference to their reasons for their actions or their thoughts on school staff approach, was the quality of

their relationships with school staff. Williams and Bryan (2012) interviewed African American college students about what factors they believed led to their success in school. Though not examining discipline specifically, a major theme that emerged from the data was that of strong student-teacher relationships that reflected care, assistance, and mentorship. The connection between relationships and student behavior is not only implied here but is supported in other studies. Murphy et al. (2013) found that middle school students chose whether to follow teacher directions based on whether or not they perceived the teacher liked them. A survey of middle school students in the Midwest looked at the relationship between student perceptions of teacher caring (defined as agreeing that teachers listen, care, can be trusted, keep promises, don't get mad, and are fair) and suspensions (Hinojosa, 2008). While these perceptions had no effect on the likelihood of OSS, as perceptions of caring increased, the likelihood of ISS increased by 27 percent. Qualitative follow-up interviews could provide insight into the potential reasons for this surprising outcome, as it is possible that while OSS may seem extreme to students, ISS could be perceived to reflect the teacher's preference to keep them in school, while still adhering to school policy. Pomeroy (1999) noted the importance of teacher-student relationships was reflected in the amount of time high school students spent discussing the issue in their interview. Students talked more about these relationships than those with peers or out of school factors. This level of importance seems logical, given that middle and high school students who perceive strong relationships tend to like school more (Hallinan, 2008). Though students want to feel valued and cared for, they expressed disdain for instances when teachers crossed an imaginary line and took on a tone or action deemed too close to parenting (Pomeroy,

1999). Given the needs of elementary students, some teachers may be crossing this line, but it is unknown how this developmental group or their caregivers perceive these actions.

*Solutions.* Given the salience of teacher relationships to students, it is not surprising that many of the suggestions they gave for improving discipline incorporated ideas commonly associated with positive relationships, such as caring, respect, and fairness. Honest communication, listening, discussion, and a polite tone were all mentioned. One middle school student discussed the importance of how the disciplinary action is administered, explaining that she would much rather be asked quietly to take a time out than be told to “get out” and handed an ODR slip (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy, 2013).

While the above suggestion seems more than feasible, some student desires for specific teacher actions expressed in the interviews reveal a lack of understanding of what is practical in the school setting. One adolescent’s statement that the teacher “could have just put me in a classroom on my own” reflects the need for joint conversations about viable options when tensions run high (Pomeroy, 1999, p. 478). If students and teachers can come together to brainstorm solutions or reactions to specific behaviors or situations, each party can explain why certain ideas would not work (e.g., the teacher could explain why a student can’t be left alone for safety reasons, and the student can explain that being called out in front of others leads to feelings of shame and the need to save face by acting out more). These types of conversations can be done with any student age group or cognitive level, given scaffolded questions and visual aids as needed. As Pomeroy (1999) notes, positive experiences at school often “occurred too late” for the



high school students, as they experienced them in an alternative setting after they had already been expelled (p. 479). Imagine the success they may have seen if this kind of care was the norm, not only in secondary schools, but in elementary schools, where students form their first relationships with teachers and schooling in general.

**Caregiver perspectives.** Three studies directly asked parents their perceptions on discipline at their child's school, two of which were done by the same authors, and the third had n=1 parent. The dearth of studies with caregivers on this topic is surprising, given the amount of literature that recommends schools form partnerships with parents to inform practices (e.g., Brandon, 2007; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Gibson et al. (2014) interviewed African American parents of middle and high school children about their perceptions of the role of race in student suspensions. All of the data presented supported the claim that parents perceive that schools administer discipline in racially biased ways. One parent also expressed concern over what occurred during exclusion: "There's no intervention...[in the] principal's office, they have like this area...where it's [an] abundance of Afro-American kids sitting back there. Not in the classroom! ...So there's no books, there's no teacher. They just sitting in there and they just have a social hour" (Gibson et al., 2014, p. 277). This was part of a larger study with a similar sample where Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, and Wilson (2014) reported similar parent frustration with school discipline, especially with the burden that falls on parents when their child is suspended, and they have to find childcare. This led to strained communication between the school and parents, which one father reported was already difficult.

Though not directly asking caregivers their perceptions, there are studies discussing parent involvement in schools. In a system where schools are independently

run and selected by parents (such as the charter system in New Orleans, or the “consumer model” in London, see Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997) parent “voice” may be limited to their choice of school, and as Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) point out, their agency may end once that choice is made. In New Orleans specifically, the “choice” itself is in the form of a caregiver’s ranking of preferred schools, but they may not be matched with their top choices. Additionally, while the area school board is publicly elected, each individual school’s board is not.

Schools’ attempts at inclusion of parent voice are often used under the guise of the term “partnership,” which implies equality, but neglects the power dynamic inherent in the school as a larger institution (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). School-sanctioned parent involvement usually comes in the form of asking for volunteers for low-skill tasks such as decorating or “helping out” in the classroom, or as parent associations, tasked with organizing social functions or fundraisers. These “involved” parents must have time, energy, and transportation resources, and feel welcomed by the school, which inherently leads to primarily White, middle-class membership (Deem, 1989).

In sum, many articles are talking about the benefit of involvement and listening to parents and students, but are not actually doing it by interviewing them, especially in the elementary age group (e.g., Brandon, 2007). Within the literature base, there is a conversation about stakeholder voices and a conversation about discipline, but few direct student or parent views on discipline are being heard or presented in the research. Those studies that do ask and listen focus on adolescent populations and only students who have experienced harsh discipline at school (e.g., suspension, expulsion, or frequent office referrals). The existing research is clear: stakeholder groups perceive school discipline

differently from one another (e.g., Thorson, 1996; Kreutter, 1983; Miller, Ferguson, & Byrne, 2000). By listening to the voices of caregivers and students of all ages with a range of experiences with school discipline, the opportunity for collaboration on the development of culturally appropriate, effective, and fair discipline policies emerges.

### **Toward a More Inclusive Disciplinary System**

Restorative justice practices have gained popularity in schools in recent years in place of student suspension or expulsion. Conducting what is called a restorative circle as an alternative to suspension after an incident involves meeting individually with all students and school personnel involved to hear their story and preview the meeting process. In addition, a meeting is scheduled at a time that works for all participants (students, teachers, and parents), usually lasting approximately an hour to ninety minutes. Then the facilitator follows up with participants a week or so post-meeting to see if the agreed upon action steps were completed (Morrison, 2005).

In terms of perspectives on disciplinary practices based in restorative justice, there is some evidence that students and parents support the idea. Wadhwa (2010) conducted interviews with community members, including one former student (now an adult), one parent, and school district representatives from a district reported as 55 percent Latino, 22 percent White, 17.5 percent Black, 3 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American (race and ethnicity of interview sample was not explicitly reported). Results indicate that all participants believe that restorative justice is more effective than suspensions at changing negative student behaviors, and that suspensions and exclusionary discipline practices are “the easy answer,” because they take less time and push difficult issues, such as addressing the root cause of maladaptive student behavior, out of the classroom or school

(Wadhwa, 2010, p. 23). This removal of a negative stimulus present in exclusionary practices is a key tenet of behaviorism and operant conditioning (Miltnerberger, 2008). The teacher or school personnel's behavior of issuing the exclusion is likely to increase in frequency, because it is negatively reinforced by a desirable result (e.g., a temporarily calmer classroom or school environment).

Restorative justice, on the other hand, requires intensive effort and time on the part of school personnel, and is less likely to provide instant gratification. Anecdotal evidence from school personnel in an urban area of the Southern United States indicates that some parents would prefer a suspension to having to come in for an intensive meeting, and teachers may doubt the effectiveness with students with behavior disorders.

As with perspectives on exclusionary discipline, examples of restorative justice in schools are usually set in high schools. Although specific studies with elementary age students about discipline practices are not present in the current literature base, there is ample evidence that they can be done (Nastasi, 2014). Elementary educators themselves are adept at working with young children and possess the skills to modify the questions and provide visual aids as needed with students as young as kindergarten. Early elementary students possess beliefs that they can learn and achieve at high levels (often higher than is accurate; Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998). But towards the end of this period of schooling, they tend to have internalized a more fixed view of ability, which likely applies to social emotional skills as well as academics. Supportive adults, such as teachers and family members present in restorative circles, can counteract this drop in a growth mindset if these practices are adopted earlier than middle or high school (Eccles, 1999). Elementary student and parent perspectives on restorative practices could

assist in necessary modification, and the inclusion of their voices could increase investment and sustainability (Nastasi et al., 2004).

What is needed is a phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of children and families at the elementary level to address the following research question: *How do students and caregivers perceive discipline practices in their school?*

### **Method**

A phenomenological study of African American student and caregiver perspectives on school discipline will attempt to fill the gap in knowledge of their experiences. In a review of research on child voices in studies of child psychological well-being, Nastasi (2014) defines five levels of child participation in research: (a) Level 1 addresses capturing child perceptions directly through focus groups or interviews and analysis preserves the children's own voices; (b) Level 2 includes focusing on child experiences and collecting data that will represent children's experience of a specific phenomenon accurately; (c) Level 3 focuses on the communication between children and adults so that the research facilitates children sharing and adults listening; (d) Level 4 involves children's voices and perspectives informing decision-making for policies and practices; (e) Level 5 is participatory research, where children are included as investigators and a part of the research team. The present study proposes engaging in levels 1 through 4, by listening to children's voices, representing their experiences, promoting the importance of listening to children by adults, and sharing the information with the school to inform policies and practices. The following sections describe the lead researcher's personal experiences and background, preliminary data, context, sampling procedures, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness procedures.

## **Personal Experiences and Background**

Knowledge of the individualized functions of behaviors and differing student motivations, paired with the understanding of the difficulty of implementation and empathy for the school staff looking for answers, led to the development of this project. The lead researcher previously worked as a school administrator in a public charter elementary school in the same city as the current school site. During her tenure there, she led the shaping and implementing of school-wide discipline practices. The goals of the school included reducing out of school suspensions by using restorative practices, implementing discussions and logical consequences for behavioral infractions, and diligently tracking office discipline referrals in a database to use for decision-making. Although these attempts were made, they were not always successful. After subsequent years in a school psychology doctoral program, she began researching programming aimed at preventing behavior issues, specifically social emotional learning curricula, and how to effectively implement and evaluate them in schools. When working on preventative implementation projects as a consultant with school personnel at the target school, however, they kept asking about what they should do when certain behaviors occur even when prevention strategies have been employed. Crowded classes and high demands on the job are not innately conducive to conversations about the root causes of behaviors, and issues of perceived safety often supersede the goal of keeping all children within the classroom walls. Because of these issues, students are frequently sent to an “office,” with some spending hours there in a day. School personnel are wondering how to make these spaces effective for behavior change, while balancing a traditional demand for “consequences.” These questions, paired with the researcher’s own experiences

working one on one with students and caregivers and hearing their stories about what led to the point of certain behaviors, highlighted a potential disconnect between the groups of students, caregivers, and school staff. The answers for what “should be done” do not lie within the researcher, or the teachers, or even the literature, but must incorporate what is deemed valid and effective by students themselves. The aim of this study is to be a first step in a formalized process of including stakeholder voices in disciplinary decision-making. But first, it is necessary to understand the current experiences of the students and their families.

**Preliminary data.** Preliminary observations and informal interviews with caregivers and school staff at multiple schools in the same city indicated varied preferences for punitive or restorative approaches to discipline. Researchers from outside of schools are adamant that exclusionary discipline practices do not work, but there are many stakeholders who still believe that suspensions should follow the exhibition of certain behaviors in schools (Way, 2011). When asked to come to the school for a restorative circle in lieu of her child’s exclusion, one caregiver replied, “why can’t you just suspend him?” A behavior interventionist said that parents need to be held more accountable for their child’s behavior, and the inconvenience of having to find childcare or stay home for a child’s suspension would encourage parents to become more involved to ensure that the behavior never happens again. Yet other stakeholders want to make sure that all students are taught skills in the aftermath of a behavioral infraction so that they will be able to better handle their responses when the situation arises again. These differences both across and within stakeholder groups highlight the diversity of thought that must be considered when preparing an effective school-wide discipline program. Are

students and caregivers in agreement with discipline policies and potential changes? Will it make a difference in student outcomes? Behavior management and response can be an exhausting, emotional aspect of teaching and parenting. For school discipline to be effective, students, caregivers, and schools need to be invested in the methods being implemented. One way to build such investment is to involve them in the design by listening to what they have to say. If a parent or student expresses that they are unhappy with the way a discipline situation was handled, it may be worth investigating why they think that, and what they would suggest in the future. This also opens up an opportunity for the sharing of information on what we know about what works, both empirically and anecdotally, and what are culturally appropriate and relevant responses to behavior infractions.

### **Context**

This study takes place at a public charter elementary school (PCES) in the Southern United States. According to school administration and district parent guide materials, the school serves about 400 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. In the first year of consultation, the student body was ninety-six percent African American and eighty-eight percent of students received free or reduced lunch, a common proxy for socioeconomic status. The building level student-teacher ratio was fourteen students per teacher; however, many teachers serve in roles outside of a traditional classroom (e.g., administrators, special educators, literacy specialists) so seventy-seven percent of classes had between twenty-one and thirty-three students. Seventy-nine percent of students chose to re-enroll at PCES after the previous school year, and the attendance rate was ninety-two percent (Recovery School District & Orleans Parish School Board, 2017). At the



time of analysis, the school had a “C” rating, which is based on a number of factors including standardized test scores and attendance data.

PCES has a college preparatory focus, but the main school goals for the 2017-18 school year focused on building relationships between students and staff. All grade levels use a social emotional learning curriculum, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; [www.pathsprogram.com](http://www.pathsprogram.com)), three days a week. According to tri-weekly structured observations, teachers were implementing the curriculum with adequate fidelity. In addition to direct instruction of social emotional skills, staff members participate in a relationship building activity called Meaningful Mondays. One Monday each month, staff members each identify a student who may be struggling behaviorally in school and they engage with that student in a positive activity to build up the relationship. These are just some of the school-wide strategies for promoting positive behavior. PCES continues to struggle with high levels of maladaptive behaviors in the classrooms, most commonly, anger outbursts, noncompliance, and repeated disrespect toward others. Prior to the 2017-18 school year, there was not a developed system for how staff would respond to these behaviors. Students were often removed from class by an administrator, and though suspension was sometimes utilized, procedures for determining consequences were inconsistent. School leaders recognized this as an area of need, and a potential area for outside consultation.

PCES had a pre-existing relationship with the International Psychological Well-Being (IPWB) Laboratory at the local university conducting this study. A member of the IPWB lab worked with the school psychologist at PCES in a practitioner role during the 2016-17 school year to screen for and conduct school-based trauma treatment groups

with fourth grade students. In the spring, PCES requested consultation from the lab member on restructuring school behavior support and discipline systems for the 2017-18 school year. The IPWB agreed to provide consultation on program development and evaluation and a team of doctoral students began consulting with the school administrators and disciplinarians (often referred to as the Behavior Intervention Team, or BI team).

The consultation continued into the 2018-19 school year, and involved various activities focused on relationship building, direct assistance and support, and advocacy for teacher voices to be heard. Actions such as engaging in school activities like professional development sessions and lunches were done in an effort to learn the culture of the school and build lasting partnerships with school staff. Direct assistance and support activities were designed based on needs identified by the school and the consultants. Advocacy for the inclusion of behavior interventionists' voices in administrative disciplinary decisions grew out of conversations consultants had with the interventionists, and a recognition that consultants are positioned to advocate, given the access the lead consultant had to administrative meetings. (see Table 1 for additional information). The consultation team also recommended providing opportunities for students and caregivers to share their perspectives on current discipline practices. Group interviews have been described as the best way to gain understanding of children's perceptions of their experiences, so PCES and the consultants agreed that the consultants would conduct focus groups with students across grade levels, as well as with caregivers (Meyers & Raymond, 2010).

Table 1

*Consultation Activities*

Relationship building	Direct assistance and support	Advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead consultant participated in school summer professional development sessions and welcome activities, such as lunches, team builders, and helped with bus duty and school operations during the first week with students</li> <li>• Lead consultant sets weekly meeting times with gate keeper</li> <li>• Lead consultant communicates with BI team via email and text</li> <li>• Consultants occasionally brings coffee/treats, gets to know individuals personally as well as professionally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultants assisted behavior interventionists and school gate-keepers with behavior response, models and coached responses</li> <li>• Consultants created ODR data entry system for school and provided other resources for developing BI/discipline systems (consultation)</li> <li>• Consultation team assisted with data entry for school and classroom observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultants checked in with BI team about how things were going and listened to their concerns at each site visit</li> <li>• Lead consultant advocated for more involvement/communication of behavior interventionists with gate-keepers such as administrators</li> </ul>

## **Sampling Procedures**

The study used an archival data set from student and caregiver focus groups conducted at the request of the school as a part of the consultation process. The consultation and school team utilized maximum variation sampling techniques for the student and caregiver samples because it was important to PCES to ensure a range of voices and experiences were captured (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of sampling requires determining criteria for selection of participants, and then ensuring that the sample represents a wide range of said criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because all members of the school had experienced the phenomenon of school discipline on some level, it was possible to use maximum variation sampling for this phenomenological study.

The sampling criteria was developed during consultation with school personnel to ensure maximum practical utility of the resulting data and analysis for future use by the school. The consultant researcher, behavior interventionists, and school administrators used office discipline referral tracking data to identify forty-one (41) potential student participants who represented a range of the following criteria: (a) had received between zero and the maximum number given of office discipline referrals in the 2017-18 school year; (b) had received between zero and the maximum number given of out of school suspensions; (c) self-identified as African American or Black; and (d) varied in age, grade level, and gender. Given the effect that academic performance can have on behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2002), after this list was made, the lead consultant and school team reviewed it with teachers from each grade level, to ensure that a range of academic performance levels were represented in the student sample. A letter describing the focus

groups was sent home to students' caregivers, along with a request for informed consent for students to participate, and a request to indicate parent interest in participating as well. Twenty-seven (27) positive student consents were returned, and twenty-three (23) students were present to participate in the focus groups. Students were asked to give assent prior to participation. One student was interviewed individually, and the recording of this interview was unable to be transcribed due to inaudibility, bringing the total number of student responses for analysis to twenty-two (22). The first focus group was conducted with all of the third grade participants who were present in school that day. Afterwards, the consultation team reflected that it would be beneficial to have fewer children in each group, not exceeding five, so that each child would have ample opportunity to share. A total of seven (7) student focus groups were conducted, with groups that were homogenous by grade level.

For the caregiver sample, school administrators and disciplinarians informally assessed the level that caregivers were involved in school activities and created a list ensuring that caregiver participants represented a range of involvement levels (e.g., high, medium, and low level of communication with school and attendance at school sponsored events) and that their children represented the criteria used for sampling children (though they are not necessarily match pairs; see Table 2 for an overview of sampling criteria). The consultants followed up with consenting caregivers via phone to set up a time to conduct the focus groups. The groups occurred at a time that coincided with a school event when many caregivers were already present, to prevent them from having to make an additional trip to the school. Additional parent participants were recruited on site, as many of the scheduled caregivers did not attend. It was important to the school that the

caregiver sample include families with a range of school involvement. The on-site recruitment prioritized this and specifically targeted caregivers who did not regularly attend events to compensate for the scheduled families who did not end up coming in. Snacks and childcare were provided. Six (6) caregiver focus groups were conducted with a total of fourteen (14) caregiver participants who had a total of twenty (20) children enrolled in PCES. Usually, the processes of data collection and analysis are iterative in qualitative studies, meaning that data is analyzed as it is collected and new focus groups are conducted until a point of saturation of new themes and ideas is reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). This study utilized archival data of completed focus groups, so analysis was conducted after the data collection period. Saturation of themes was still reached during analysis.

The sample was predominantly African American (one White caregiver and one White student participated), and both caregivers' children and the students interviewed represented a wide range of ODRs received. The caregiver sample was predominantly female, while the student sample had a higher percentage of male participants (see Table 3 for sample demographics and representation).

Table 2

*Sampling Purposefully*

Sampling Criteria	
<u>Children</u>	<u>Parents/Family</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age/grade/gender range</li> <li>• African American/Black</li> <li>• Range of number of ODRs</li> <li>• Range of academic performance levels</li> <li>• Ensuring cross-variation of criteria (e.g., range of ODR number across and within all grades)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents or family members whose children represent a range of the above criteria (children did not have to have participated in child focus groups)</li> <li>• Range of school involvement levels (high, medium, low)</li> <li>• Ensuring cross-variation of criteria (e.g., high involvement, low child ODR number; high involvement high child ODR number)</li> </ul>

*Note.* All sampling criteria were developed in consultation with school administration to ensure maximum school utility of the data collected

Table 3

*Sample Demographics and Representation*

Demographics										
	<u>Caregiver (n=14)</u>					<u>Student (n=22)</u>				
Male/female	2/12					14/8				
African American	13					21				
Student ODRs (range)	0-57					0-79				
Student grade	k	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	k	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
Representation*	3	2	4	6	4	5	3	3	6	5

*\*Note.* Some caregivers have multiple children in different grade levels, therefore the total caregiver student grade representation exceeds the total number of caregivers interviewed (n=19)

**Data Collection**

Data were collected through focus groups and individual semi-structured follow-up interviews conducted by consultants as a part of the consultation process (see

Appendix for sample protocols; see Table 4 for an outline of data collection activities and ethics). All protocols were shared and reviewed by the school principal and dean of culture prior to use. A total of five consultants conducted the student focus groups. The consultants were predominantly female (n=4), and one identified as White, one identified as White and Jewish, one identified as Black, one identified as Mexican, and one identified as Asian and White. At least two consultant team members were present for each group to facilitate the process, take notes, and assist with logistics. Two White female consultants conducted all of the caregiver focus groups. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded with consent.

Developmental considerations were made to ensure the student participants were able to clearly understand the purpose and questions asked, as well as to express themselves accurately. The team started each focus group by explaining the purpose and confidentiality (including examples). Next, the students were encouraged to draw ecomaps (see Appendix B) as an elicitation exercise to both engage them in the group and also to get them thinking about important people in their lives at school (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). This also provided something for the participants to do with their hands (hold markers) and eyes (choice to look down at their drawing or make eye contact with others) throughout the focus group. When it comes to questions, young children may have difficulty articulating the details of a specific incident when asked about it directly at first, however, when they are given a situation and asked what “usually” happens, they are able to describe and recall their own experiences quite accurately (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Thus, the consultants developed a protocol that started broadly (e.g., How do you feel about school? what happens when someone breaks a rule?) and then



became more individualized and specific (e.g., what happens when you go to the office?). Children also benefit from cues beyond just questions, so the protocol included descriptions of typical classroom scenarios (Steward & Steward, 1996). Additionally, third and fourth grade students were asked to give suggestions for how to ask these questions and have this conversation with younger students (e.g., how would you ask this question to your younger brother or sister?). The caregiver protocol was developed based on the student protocol, as to elicit responses to the similar scenarios and questions, but from a different perspective.

**Field issues and ethical considerations.** Given the many operations occurring at once within a school, the consultation team recognized that it was likely that issues would arise in the field and planned accordingly. The lead consultant secured a private space for focus groups and had to adjust in the moment when reserved spaces were needed by school personnel at the last minute. The lead consultant worked with school administrators, teachers, and caregivers to arrange for uninterrupted time in students' and caregivers' schedules, and provided reminder calls to ensure participant attendance. The lead consultant used a portion of the scheduled weekly meetings with school personnel to preemptively problem solve and plan the logistics of the focus groups. The lead consultant kept detailed field notes and consultant team meeting notes to identify certain problems to be solved at the next meetings.

The consulting team clearly presented limits of confidentiality at the beginning of each focus group. A disclosure of possible indirect harm was made in one focus group, and the lead consultant let the students know that she would need to talk to others to ensure that kids were safe. She then met with the school social psychologist and principal

and worked with them to determine next steps. After the completion of both student and caregiver focus groups, the lead consultant met with school administrators and discussed major trends observed that could assist in planning for policies and procedures. No detailed analysis was conducted as a part of the consultation, but both the principal and the lead consultant concluded that the rich perceptions and experiences expressed by the stakeholders in the focus groups would be worthy of further analysis and could benefit a greater audience.

Table 4

*Consultation Data Collection Activities & Ethics*

Activity	Plan
Data collected and used in consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• At least 2 consultants present, up to 6</li> <li>• Consultant observations in BI room and classrooms</li> <li>• Meeting notes</li> <li>• Field notes taken by consultants</li> <li>• Artifacts (e.g., ODRs, written student reflections, policy documents)</li> </ul>
Recording information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio recorded</li> <li>• Consultant notes typed or written during focus groups</li> </ul>
Minimizing field issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes taken by consultants</li> <li>• Weekly meetings conducted with gatekeepers (administrators)</li> <li>• Weekly meetings conducted with consultation team</li> </ul>
Attending to ethical and cultural considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewed confidentiality with stakeholders clearly and often</li> <li>• Summary of focus groups provided to school by lead consultant after focus group and interview completion</li> </ul>

**Managing and organizing data.** After the consultation process, PCES granted permission for the IPWB lab to have access to archival data from the consultation (audio recordings of focus groups, meeting notes, and written observations) for further analysis by researchers in the lab; the project was approved by Tulane IRB as part of the IPWB project. Audio recordings of all interviews were transcribed by undergraduate research assistants in the IPWB lab and the lead researcher. Transcriptions identified participants by either an “S” for student or “C” for caregivers and were saved in password-protected files in IPWB lab online database. The focus group data were then analyzed by a coding team consisting of the lead researcher (who had been the lead consultant and is the author of this study) and a research assistant.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcription and coding are key methods to the qualitative research process in order to encapsulate what participants are actually saying with minimal researcher interpretation (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2016). A description of procedures for managing and organizing data, reading and memoing, and coding follows (also see Table 5).

Table 5

*Data Analysis Spiral*

Activity	Plan
Managing and organizing data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcribed focus groups</li> <li>• File name: SchoolName.Caregiver.Focus.Group.1</li> <li>• Saved in password protected document in IPWB lab online database</li> <li>• Used “I” to indicate the interviewer</li> <li>• Used “S,” or “C” to refer to students and caregivers, respectively in transcriptions</li> <li>• Lead researcher reviewed all transcriptions for accuracy prior to analysis</li> </ul>
Reading and memoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coding team read through transcripts and took notes indicating initial ideas on separate paper</li> <li>• Coding team bracketed their personal thoughts and experiences in the margin or on separate paper</li> <li>• Lead researcher read through meeting notes and written observations and provided coding team with relevant background information</li> </ul>
Coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coding team examined each transcript sentence by sentence and compared, conceptualized, and categorized the data</li> <li>• Engaged in consensus coding</li> <li>• Identified exemplary phrases from the participants</li> <li>• Grouped into categories representing dilemmas</li> </ul>

Analysis of the focus group data was conducted using an inductive process in which the codes and themes emerged directly from the transcriptions of the participant voices. Since the approach was phenomenological, the coding team focused on individual and shared experiences with school discipline and how the participants perceived and gave meaning to those experiences. The intent was for the participants to be able to tell their own stories, so direct quotations were used, and codes and themes use verbatim language to preserve original meaning.

Coding was completed by two White female researchers. First, each researcher read the transcripts of the student transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data in its entirety. Out of acknowledgement that researchers bring their own experiences, biases, and preconceived ideas to their work, both wrote down thoughts that occurred throughout this reading, a process referred to as bracketing. Given the differences in racial and ethnic identification of consultants, researchers, and participants, it was especially important to consider potential racial biases and cultural misunderstandings. The researchers met and discussed what they had read and bracketed and began open coding. They continued to discuss potential cultural differences, misunderstandings, and biases throughout the analysis. Open coding entailed examining each transcript sentence by sentence and comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The team engaged in consensus coding, independently generating codes for groups of text, and discussing their categorization until consensus was reached. New codes were used and defined as they emerged. This process was repeated with the caregiver focus group transcripts. New codes were added as they arose and were applied to student focus group data as part of the iterative coding process.

Then the researchers grouped the open codes into predominant themes, either present in one stakeholder group or across both, using exemplary phrases from the transcriptions. The initial coding into “categories derived directly from the data” was done to organize the data in a way that preserved the original meaning of the response, using language and phrases directly from participant statements, and thus would be a representation meaningful to the participants. This method is what Gough and Scott

(2000) describe as a way to “facilitate ‘looking in’” to the participant’s view of the data (p. 343).

As relationships between codes were analyzed and themes emerged, it became clear that participants’ perceptions of their experiences were often contradictory, not necessarily between each other, but individuals often had competing perceptions and ideas about their own experiences. Some were able to actualize this and articulate this ambivalence themselves, while others remained unaware. This potential cognitive dissonance seemed crucial to understanding the lived experience of the stakeholders. The lead researcher returned to the methods literature to see how others had conceptualized these types of internal contradictions and found an applicable type of qualitative analysis known as dilemma analysis, first introduced by Winter in 1982. Dilemma analysis is a way to present links between coded categories, and to present patterns that are present through multiple codes (e.g., the dissonance between statements about the necessity of suspension and about the ineffectiveness of the practice is relevant to multiple codes). This identification of patterns that emerged in terms of broader dilemmas in the responses is a way of linking the codes to facilitate meaning for an external audience to engage in ‘looking out’ of the data towards more abstract meaning (Gough & Scott, 2000).

### **Trustworthiness**

Existing standards for qualitative research typically involve the establishment of validity through the use of techniques designed to develop trustworthiness (Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2016). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the four criteria that create trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following techniques proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were utilized in the current study:

1. *Prolonged engagement*: the IPWB consultants collaborated with the school administrators, consulted in the behavior intervention room, and attended meetings and professional developments given by the school for over six months before data collection, and more than one year post. This provided context for ensuring engagement of stakeholders and contributed to trustworthiness of the archival data analyzed in the present study.
2. *Peer debriefing*: Once data analysis for the research study began, periodic discussions were conducted with colleagues outside of the study for input on analysis methodology and organization of findings.
3. *Collaboration with site*: members of the school community were involved in the development of evaluation questions, sampling, and protocol development. Lead consultant provided a summary of focus groups to school during consultation meetings. A final executive summary of results from the present archival data analysis within this research study will be presented to school personnel to inform future policies and practices.
4. *Thick description*: archival data includes procedures and contextual information that were documented in detail during consultation and are described in sufficient detail in reporting to facilitate replicability and to ensure transferability of data collection process
5. *Audit trail*: records were kept of all data collection and analysis procedures as well as formal and informal notes.

6. *Triangulation*: archival data were collected from multiple sources (students and caregivers) and were analyzed by multiple researchers (Lead researcher and research assistant).

## **Results**

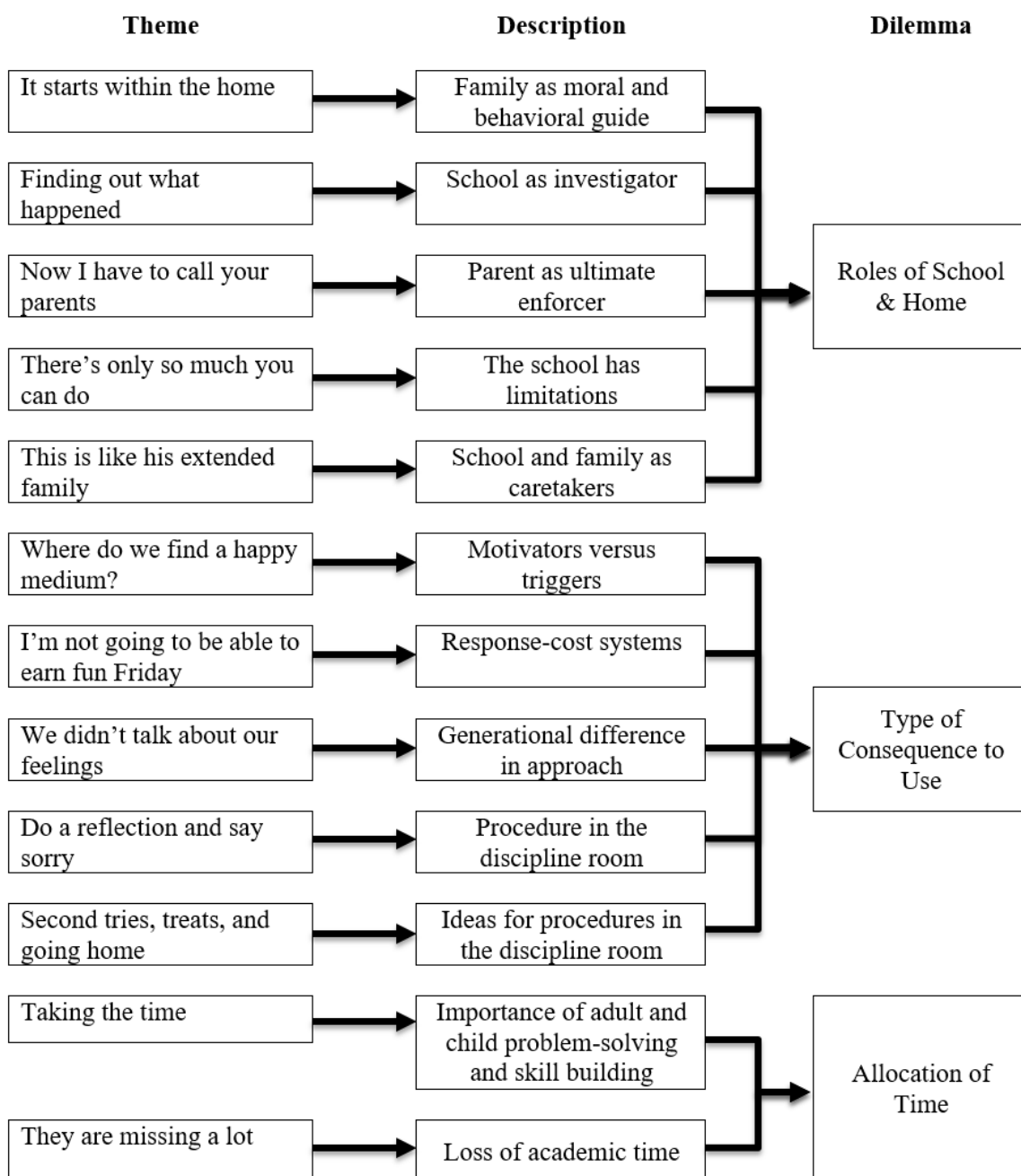
The themes identified from the data are shown in Figures 1 and 2 and described in detail below. The themes represent student and caregiver perceptions of their lived experiences of disciplinary practices at their (or their child's) school. Most were present across both groups, while two were generated by caregivers only (see Figure 1). Twelve themes emerged, all titled with direct quotes from participants: (a) it starts within the home, (b) finding out what happened, (c) now I have to call your parents, (d) there's only so much you can do, (e) this is like his extended family, (f) where do we find a happy medium? (g) I'm not going to be able to earn Fun Friday, (h) we didn't talk about our feelings, (i) do a reflection and say sorry, (j) second tries, treats, and going home, (k) taking the time, and (l) they are missing a lot. The first five describe the overarching dilemma of which roles the school or the families should assume in the disciplinary responses to student behavior at school, termed, Roles of School and Home. The second five underscore the dilemmas participants experience when evaluating specific consequences and reconciling them with their beliefs, termed, Type of Consequence to Use. The last two themes illustrate the dilemma of the need for the school to spend time on resolving conflicts and teaching children relevant social emotional skills while not losing academic instruction time, termed, Allocation of Time. Excerpts from focus group participants are presented to illustrate each theme and broader dilemma.



Figure 1.  
Exemplary Phrases & Open Codes

Caregiver	Child
<b>It starts within the home</b>	
Parents bear responsibility for children's social emotional skills	Children follow parents over teachers
<b>Finding out what happened</b>	
The school needs to find out details and causes of incidents	(Caregivers only)
<b>Now I have to call your parents</b>	
Parents control the effectiveness of discipline	Calling parents is a credible threat
<b>There's only so much you can do</b>	
Parents have to solve the problem	Children feel safer when certain students are excluded
<b>This is like his extended family</b>	
Staff and families have strong relationships	Teachers care through tough love and caring actions
<b>Where do we find a happy medium?</b>	
The clip works for some and exacerbates others	The clip works for some and exacerbates others
<b>I'm not going to be able to earn fun Friday</b>	
Perception of what you could not earn	Perception of what you could not earn/loss of previously earned privileges
<b>We didn't talk about our feelings</b>	
Generational differences in school discipline	(Caregivers only)
<b>Do a reflection and say sorry</b>	
Discipline room procedures consistent	Discipline room procedures and effectiveness can be inconsistent
<b>Second tries, treats, and going home</b>	
Suggestions of actions that already exist at PCES	Suggestions of actions that already exist at PCES
<b>Taking the time</b>	
Caregivers value adults taking time to talk and listen	Children value adults taking time to talk and listen
<b>They are missing a lot</b>	
Talking through behaviors leads to missed academics	Connection between the discipline room and lost academic time

Figure 2. Themes



## **Roles of School and Home**

Ambiguities surrounding what aspects of the child's discipline should fall under the auspices of teachers as opposed to what parents should bear responsibility for were prominent in the data. Caregivers frequently spoke about the impact of parent modeling skills and about the importance of providing stability in a child's home environment to a child's in-school behavior. Students also brought up the role their parents play as both a kind of moral and behavioral guide. Caregivers alone, however, mentioned that if a child is having repeated issues, the school should "look into" what is going on at home. The data shows that this role of parent as teacher and school as investigator (a term used by caregivers) is not immutable, particularly in instances when parents have to try to find out the details of an incident that their child was involved in at school, and the school staff can only address a limited amount of the environmental circumstances at home. Caregivers and students agreed that both parents and the school have a role in disciplinary action, but the data reveals incongruity in the ideas presented, where caregivers identify parents as the responsible party, but also state that schools are not able to rely on home cooperation. Students similarly recognize that the enforcement of exclusionary consequences lie with caregivers, not school staff. The participant ambivalence in the aggregate "roles of school and home" dilemma will be detailed through description of the following themes identified by phrases used by the participant groups: it starts within the home; finding out what happened; now I have to call your parents; there's only so much you can do; and this is like his extended family.

**It starts within the home.** While both groups of participants brought up the idea of family as a moral and behavioral guide, caregivers more explicitly and repeatedly

mentioned the relevance of how parents teach and discipline children at home to disciplinary issues elsewhere. One parent noted that a child's behavior at home would be reflected at school: "...[it starts] with the home training first, and then when the kids come to school, you can see how the respect or the discipline is at home." (Parent, Caregiver Focus Group 1). This idea held for positive behaviors as well for behaviors parents construed as maladaptive. Caregivers discussed the congruence between what they do at home and what the school does, citing instances of taking something away as a consequence and modeling how to handle conflict. Consequently, they also described "other" parents as modeling inappropriate behaviors and responses. For example, "a child came to school with a BB gun. Like, what are you teaching these kids at home? So, obviously they see you're carrying a weapon, so they think it's ok to bring it to school" (Parent, Caregiver Focus Group 4). Another parent echoed the primacy of parent responsibility, saying, "it's not them [children], it's their background, and what they've been raised around. What they've been doing and what they're used to...what their parents allow." (Parent, Caregiver Focus Group 2). When considering disciplinary action in abstract or when considering other people's children as committing infractions, caregivers tended to adhere to the notion that parents were primarily at fault for a child's behavior. Students did not blame parents for their own behaviors, but they did make it clear that if what a parent said went against what a teacher said, they would be sure to follow their parent's guidance, regardless of the school consequence. For example, a fourth grader shared, "My mama said, 'if the teacher say no if you trying to go to the bathroom or get water, walk out the classroom and go to the bathroom,' and when I came back the teacher started fussing at me." This highlights the difficult place that students

find themselves in when they have to negotiate differing messages from adults who play overlapping roles in their lives. Another example of a student choosing their caregivers as the ultimate guide to follow was found in a variation of a common adage. When describing what someone else might say when told to go to the discipline room, a fourth grader offered, “you can’t tell me what to do you ain’t my parent.”

Interestingly, caregiver allocation of blame for a child’s behavior to the parent was tempered once the discussion shifted to a participant’s own child. To put this in context, many of the parents participating in the focus groups have children with repeated behavioral infractions. And while they recognize their role and the fallibility of their children (e.g., Parent in Caregiver Focus Group 1, “I’m not saying [my children are] perfect, they makes mistakes too...”), comments regarding how a parent is solely or in large part the responsible party for negative behavior were reserved for “other” parents. This is illustrated in quotes by multiple caregivers across focus group sessions, such as, “I’m one of the parents who cares about my child” (Parent, Caregiver Focus Group 1) as well as the following:

I'm gonna say 92% of parents don't care what their kids do, they don't care if they eat, they don't care if they even make it to school, you got that 8% like us, that's actually here, and comes to everything...when you call parents, parents don't care.

(Parent, Caregiver Focus Group 4)

While caregivers appear to recognize the amount of work and frustration involved in working with their own child, they have less visibility into other people’s home lives. Loss of visibility into other people’s home lives may have made it easier to cast blame and make assumptions about what is and is not happening in other households.

Additionally, many of the caregivers in the focus groups have children who are exhibiting maladaptive behaviors and interacting with the school disciplinarians regularly, despite having “one of the parents who cares.” This underscores the uncertainty or lack of clarity surrounding the role of the family or parenting in a child’s behavior.

In many instances, the role of the school was defined as limited, and primarily academic, while the parents’ role was outlined as ensuring their children can be in the classroom to learn. This was described by one caregiver as “at school, you guys teach the children, but it's also our job, as parents, to continue that, so it's saying that with the behavior aspect as well.” The sentiment of school being for academic education is echoed in child focus group findings, with multiple statements like, “our parents sent us to school to learn new things, not to cut up” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade student). But this binary role designation ignores the context of both school and home, and the transience of social emotional and academic skills needed in both settings. This is not neglected in the findings, but rather highlighted through additional, seemingly dissonant statements. The ambivalence lies in the simultaneously expressed idea that the school must also assume the role of determining the facts of behavior incidents and the underlying causes of repeated behaviors, and also the role of doling out consequences, or disciplinary actions.

**Finding out what happened.** Students exhibited some frustration that school personnel sometimes blamed the wrong child for an incident. They also raised the idea that children might tell their parents that they did not actually do the behavior as charged when talking to their parents on the phone, whether true or not. Though examples arose concerning the potential for staff to wrongly accuse or students to falsely deny, did not contribute significantly to the theme. The idea that part of the school’s job is to

determine the facts and to get them right was, however, very significant to caregivers.

The school's role as investigator was described in specific disciplinary incidents involving participants, but then suggested as a more systemic approach to finding out what is going on at home for "other" kids. For instance, two parents in Focus Group 1 realized that their children had been involved in a disciplinary incident with each other. One parent described "the story that [the school] gave me" about a child stabbing her child with a pencil on the bus, and expressed disappointment that the school did not look into multiple sides of the story thoroughly enough, because her child received a disciplinary consequence that she felt was unnecessary. A second parent in Focus Group 1 responded,

I have a confession, that story: that was my son. And the story that you're saying, is a completely different story than I got. And it's funny because that's one incident that happened on the bus, and then there was another incident and I heard my son's story and then I heard the story from [a teacher] and then somebody else came, and I was just standing there and was like, 'My God, it's like three different stories!'

Both parents felt uncomfortable with how situations were investigated by the school. One cited "the pencil situation" as the one time she has felt uncomfortable talking to somebody at the school, because she did not think anyone there really knew what happened, and thus, dealt with it in a way that she did not agree with. Another situation occurred where a child was accused of bringing contraband, but the school did not keep said item to show the parent, throwing it out instead. It was then later confirmed that her child was not the one who brought it to school, but he had already served a punishment of

missing a holiday celebration, whereas the student who did actually bring it got to attend. The parent felt that this could have been prevented if the school had kept the item and investigated more thoroughly. Caregivers perceive it as the school's responsibility to investigate effectively, but this seems at odds with some of the caregiver perceptions that the school is there to teach academics, and that parents are ultimately responsible for children's behavior. Additionally, it raises the question of how school personnel are trained and what skills they need to accurately determine what happened and why.

When presented with a scenario of a hypothetical student having recurring verbal and physical outbursts in a classroom, caregivers across groups suggested that "something deeper" was going on, and that the school should "investigate," or "parents should be contacted to find out what's causing the child to act out like that. See what's going on in that child's life, because it could be something going on in the house." A parent from Focus Group 4 was more direct: "Y'all need people to be going and inspecting these people's houses and check on these children." Another parent, this time in Focus Group 2, acknowledged that the school and parents will need to work together:

Now, it's just not normal, when kids are constantly coming and doing the same repetitive thing over and over and over; something else is wrong. You know, whether it's something stemming from home, or something that's actually going on at school that's making that child act like that, because that could be a possibility, because at that point, we all need to investigate, you know, is it a student that is making him, or is he scared, or is it a teacher that's making him scared, or is it something at home. It's time for us to find out.



This use of “we all need to investigate” contrasts with the passive “parents should be contacted” and the direct “y’all need people to...,” meaning the school. These statements also raised the question of what should be done if the school investigates and finds that there is “something going on in the house.” Caregivers were unsure of what the school or parents should do in that situation. More general statements of “something should be done” were made, but lack of clarity of who should do the “something” and the question of what that should be remained. Despite the role confusion in investigation, caregivers mostly praised the use of communication between the school and families and students noted the frequency. But instead of continuing a line of collaboration insinuated in the above quote, role delineation by both caregivers and students continued by describing the school taking the role of doling out disciplinary consequences and parents as the enforcers or the embodiment of the consequence itself.

**Now I have to call your parents.** Students consistently quoted teachers and disciplinarians using a version of this phrase. Both stakeholder groups reported that calling parents is a part of the standard disciplinary procedure after an ODR is issued and a written or verbal reflection is completed. While parents described this as informative and an opportunity for them to help their child get “back on track” (e.g., “what I also love is they give me a phone call, and she actually gives me an opportunity to speak with him to try to give him words of encouragement,” Caregiver Focus Group 2), students described phone calls home as something undesirable that could be used as a threat, where the phone call home was the actual consequence for the infraction. This fits with descriptions of other school disciplinary practices being highly parent-dependent. Students cited times when a teacher would threaten to call parents after repeated

directions were not followed, and some students also described the real “trouble” beginning once they got home. A second grader talked about a hypothetical situation of receiving an ODR:

What if you get home and your mom knows you had ODR and then you would get in trouble or get punished or sent to your room and not come outside for a day or a week. Then your mama, if you go to school on a Tuesday and cut up, she gonna, like, put you in your room or not let you watch tv, or she probably would embarrass you in front of your class.

A third grader talked about this threat as actually working to prevent behavior that could warrant an ODR: “sometimes I be very mad but I just don't be doing nothing because they gonna have to call my mom.” A kindergartener shared this sentiment saying that avoiding punishment by parents was “why I be good and never [have a bad report] again.” A fourth grader stated, “Suspension do help you. You go home to your mama and daddy and they be punishing you, and then that help you when you go back to school to learn from your mistakes.”

Other caregivers and students talk about parents not always assuming the role of enforcer or punisher when it is essentially assigned to them by the school. This was especially prevalent during discussions of suspension. A parent from Focus Group 2 states, “you just can't go home and, you know, you get to do whatever, play the game, whatever, but that's when the parent comes into the picture, because if they're glorifying their child while they're on suspension, that's an issue.”

When asked if suspensions help improve kids' behavior, a fourth grader recognized the importance of the parental role, "Maybe. It depends on how their mommy or daddy gonna take it." A caregiver similarly stated,

It depends, it depends on what type of parent it is, because you got some that just have an eight-hour break; some want their kids to actually get an education, but it's thought that most of the parents just don't care—'oh I'll handle it when I get home,' and [the kids] come back to school and it's the same thing.

But perhaps it could be viewed, rather than the parents needing to provide or enforce consequences, as the school needing to be the most desirable place to be. This is illustrated by a kindergartener's description of his suspension experience:

[I felt] sad, but I was happy. I was happy I got to play at my church, I got to go to Chuck- E-Cheese by my mom, and I got to go to the skating rink. But I was like, I really wanted to go back to school to learn.

And a fourth grader said what he did when given a choice: "actually, today it was the decision of me whether to come to school, because my little brother was suspended, but I wanted to come to school because it's fun at school." This anecdote begets the question, whose role is it to ensure attendance: caregiver, school, or child? By being "fun" or teaching the importance of being at school to learn, both of these children expressed a desire to be there, one when the school would not allow him to go, thus preventing his attendance by issuing a suspension, and one where the caregiver delegated the role to the child, and he chose to attend. The ambiguity of roles for attendance is conflated with discipline, as both cases involve suspension, with differing parent, child, and school actions.

**There's only so much you can do.** There were calls for the school to further reach out to parents for assistance with behavior outside of ODR notification or suspension, but still the dominant perception was that the onus of solving the issue lay with the parent. One caregiver suggested that the school “invite the parents to come so they can actually see it themselves and try to nip it in the bud and figure out what’s going on.” Another said, “ call the parents, [the student] didn't learn this [because of their behavior], would you like for me to send a packet home for them so maybe you can help them, because, in my class today, you know, nothing happened.” Even when described as teamwork, there is still a delineation of roles, as described by a caregiver, “It's teamwork; it's an effort. You can't have the school try to take over parents’ jobs. And that's what they feel, that they're obligated to take over behavior and everything, but it starts at home.”

The dilemma between wanting clear roles for parents and teachers while also recognizing that each group has very little control over the other is exemplified in the following caregiver statement:

There's only so much you can do, so like, it starts from home...I mean, the school can't do everything. I mean, they can only do so much, you know, it's a school. I mean, they're mothers and fathers at school, teaching your children, but you have to instill this at home. Like, I can't expect your child to come here and know about Christopher Columbus, but I can expect for your child to come here and know home manners. Like, good evening, good morning. I can't control your house, but you can't control my classroom.

The last sentence is useful as a snapshot of the dilemma because it captures a lot of the complexity involved in the delineation of boundaries between home and classroom, parent and teacher. If a school cannot influence disciplinary action at home, as caregivers suggest is true, how can schools provide effective discipline in other ways?

Relatedly, students highlighted some of the limitations that schools have in their options for responding to more extreme behaviors, and how there really is only so much they can do once a student has done something dangerous to others. Children describe examples of extreme behavior by others and shared that they feel safer when those students are removed from the classroom and sent to the discipline room or suspended. A third grader shared, “Sometimes I feel like when people in my classroom are being unsafe or something like that, I feel scared sometimes because I don't wanna get hurt.” A kindergartener similarly said, “when they be bad and do bad things and throw chairs, that makes me feel unsafe.” When students are feeling unsafe due to the behavior of another child, schools need to make the difficult decision of whether to exclude that child in the moment, and for how long afterwards. Another kindergarten student described a situation where a student bit her friend and got suspended. When asked how that made her feel, she replied simply, “safe.”

In response to if they feel safe at school, one kindergartener said “yes, but sometimes...there will be bad [students] that come to our class and calm down and stuff so that’s why he come in our class and sometimes he hit my class.” The student is likely referring to the PCES practice of sending a student who is not meeting behavioral expectations to another classroom for a break, referred to as using a “buddy classroom.” This is usually used as a step prior to assigning an ODR, with the idea that a brief

separation nearby with another class may prevent longer removal. This shows that even when the school is attempting to limit harsher exclusion and help one classroom, it may have the unintended consequence of negatively impacting another classroom. This illustrates the idea that caregivers brought up that there is “only so much [the school] can do,” in that common practices that are feasible and well intentioned may not be enough to ensure the safety and equity of opportunity for all students.

**This is like his extended family.** Despite roles being discussed as different, one very common theme was a declaration that this school feels like a family. This seemed to stem from trust, like one caregiver in Focus Group 2 said, “I’m not here all day, so this is like his extended family.” And another in Focus Group 3 described, “The relationship we have with the teachers or the staff here is more like family.” This sentiment was brought up in every caregiver group, with a parent in Focus Group 6 summarizing, “It’s like, the whole school is like a motivational...motivational school family.” A parent in Focus Group 3 also noted, “They don’t pay them enough, because especially with this city, because what our kids go through on a daily basis, especially here at [this school], these teachers not only teach these kids but, they parenting these kids.”

Children described knowing that teachers care because they provide boundaries, verbally express love and care for students, want them to succeed in the future, and attend personal events. A third grade student explained, “if they didn’t care about you, they wouldn’t like give you a reflection, they would just like let you play around. But if they did care about you they make you learn your lesson.” Another third grader agreed: “I think they care about you because if they didn’t care about you, they’d let you scream. They wouldn’t help you. They’d let them stay in class.” A third student added, “they

would let them fight you.” Some ambivalence was present among fourth grade students, however. One student explained, “ [disciplinarians] always say they love us, but they don’t. If they would love us why every time we go in there we write the reflection and everything, they gonna start with...what they do love is hard love. They just go hard on us. Because they don’t want us to do that in the streets. That’s why they do that.” It seems here that the student started out making one point, that the disciplinarians do not love them, but then changed to describe the type of love as “hard love.”

A second grader described, “[Students] have to care about their teachers because their teachers take care of them. They teachers do everything they want to do.” Another followed with, “teachers be like kinda worried about you if you do something bad. They just be worried about you if you gonna get kicked out of school if you go to [the discipline room], get a write-up, or get an ODR. The teachers be worried about you if you gone turn it around or not.” A fourth grader said, “so teachers, they do love us,” and when asked how they know, a different fourth grader replied, “because some of the teachers be like ‘I love you’ and stuff. That mean, like, they want us to succeed, and they want us to graduate from college so we could get a good job for our kids and all.” A second grade student said they knew that teachers care about the students who often get in trouble “because they like do things for them; they say I need to take a break, they just go they just take a break. They don’t just say no,”

A caregiver in Focus Group 1 added that teachers “always wanna be involved outside of the school, and that says a lot.” A third grade student identified a specific teacher as important to them “because she came to my first communion.” Another parent described the response from the school after her son was in a serious accident: “all his

teachers came to the hospital and he was so happy... [one teacher] had all the kids make cards for him, and books and stuff.”

Stakeholders clearly view this level of teacher involvement as an asset to the school.

However, if the school is like family, that further blurs roles outlined in the above paragraphs. A student described that “sometimes teachers feel frustrated because all the teachers are trying to get you a good education and you won’t let them do that.” This is a phrase previously used to describe parents’ intentions, now ascribed to teachers as well.

A fourth grade student presented a different view, “Some of [the teachers care]. Some of them not. Because some people, so teachers, they do love us but some people they say they love us, but they don’t. They think because we just go to their school that they know us and love us.” This clearly demonstrates that perceptions of the roles of families and school personnel in school discipline are quite complex. They are seen as simultaneously disparate and conflated, as both groups assume roles of teacher, parent, investigator, disciplinarian, and enforcer.

### **Type of Consequence to Use**

Students described behaviors that lead to disciplinary actions at their school as hitting, kicking, throwing chairs, pushing computers off of desks, running out of the classroom, cursing, stealing, screaming, and saying, “I don’t care” or “no” to a teacher. The data show that most adults and students agree that some action needs to be taken in the moment after such behaviors are exhibited in a classroom setting. The stakeholder groups demonstrate ambivalence, however, between what they suggest as consequences and their evaluation of such tactics as problematic for various reasons. Their responses indicate that caregivers and students recognize that different practices work for different



students, but that there is also a need for consistency and fairness with a system for everyone. They asked important questions about how to achieve a balance, which are similar to the questions that teachers and administrators at the school asked in meetings conducted during consultation. These themes are detailed through the headings: where do we find a happy medium?, I'm not going to be able to earn Fun Friday, we didn't talk about our feelings, do a reflection and say sorry, and second tries, treats, and going home.

**Where do we find a happy medium?** Every classroom in this school has what is referred to as a "clip chart" or "color chart," which is a chart divided vertically into five sections, each a different color of the rainbow, in order. There is a clothespin, or "clip," attached to the chart for each student, with their name written on it. Each morning all of the clips are clipped to the middle section of the chart, which is green. Throughout the day, the teacher may move a child's clip "down" or "up" to a different color based on the child's adherence to classroom and school rules. The student fills out a paper to bring home that says what color their clip was on at the end of the day, and depending on their grade level, at midday as well. A parent described the differences in grade levels:

Fourth grade only gets one color; third, second, first, and kindergarten get two colors. They get one before lunch, and after lunch they start back on green. So no matter what color they were on before, they are re-set to green and have a chance to go up or to go down.

The narrative given to students is that if you make a mistake and get "clipped down," you can fix your behavior, follow the rules, and get "clipped back up." The underlying motivation to follow the rules then comes from either wanting to stay where you are (green), or to move up to blue or purple, rather than down to yellow or red. The

dilemma lies in the characterization of the clip system as both motivating and antagonizing, by both caregivers and students.

Some have clearly internalized the narrative about the clip chart presented by school staff, such as the second grader who said it is helpful “because you could get a clip moved down and right back up” and the kindergartener who stated that “getting feedback makes you be great and follow directions the first time.” Others find it exacerbates defiance, and responses to “being clipped down” range from “you would, like, walk out the classroom or say ‘no’ to the teacher that ‘I want my clip moved back up’” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade student) to “if they get a clip moved down to red they gonna stand up and throw a chair or something; get a fit” (Kindergarten student). Developmentally, it may be that students are repeating the phrases that they have heard adults say to them about the clip and why it works, rather than truly believing that this type of “feedback” is what makes you follow directions. This is still important as it demonstrates the understanding of the intended purpose of the clip (e.g., to move back up, to follow directions the first time), but perhaps greater instruction on how students can use the system to improve in the classroom is warranted. The descriptions of undesired responses to the clip may be just descriptions of what they have seen. Why the clip causes such distress or perceived aggravation, beyond “getting in trouble” was difficult to elicit. This is also developmentally appropriate, as children begin to move through stages of moral development. Most elementary-aged children would be in the preconventional stage and still define right and wrong by what they are rewarded or punished for (Kohlberg, 1968).

As demonstrated in quotes above, some children say that the clip being moved does not work, Others stress the value of being able to get their clip moved back up.

When asked what adults at school should do when students make a mistake, a kindergartener said: “[they should] listen to you. And give you another chance to turn it around before the end of the day and go home on a bad color. So they let you turn it around if you on red you could still turn it around before the end of the day.” Second graders also shared that they were not too concerned with having their clip moved down, because they knew that they could get it moved back up by following directions.

Some of this disagreement could come from implementation. Students also described some inconsistencies how this system is used in different classrooms. For example, in response to being given a scenario of a child talking over the teacher, one kindergartener said that in his classroom, the child would have a clip moved down right away. Another kindergartener said that their teacher would give a warning, and she would only move the child’s clip if they were still talking after three warnings.

Caregivers and students agreed that the order of adult response to undesired behavior in the classroom was (1) a warning (2) a second, and possibly third, warning or chance to “fix it” and (3) a clip moved down to a lower color. And while some feel that this is “a great system for kids” (caregiver from Focus Group 2), and it keeps her son “aware of his behavior” and focused on “okay, I have to make better choices,” other caregivers challenged this with, “It makes them focus on that one thing (Caregiver, Focus Group 3) and “[in his mind] it’s that he’s on purple, not what he’s learned that day.” (A different caregiver, Focus Group 3). The perception that the clip increases student awareness of behavior seems to be agreed upon, but whether that awareness is actually productive remains controversial.

Some had visceral reactions to the mention of the clip chart in the focus groups, making noises and throwing their heads back with statements like, “My son, he can’t stand it. Once he gets one clip down, he just snowballs” (Caregiver, Focus Group 3). Many other caregivers agreed that getting a clip moved down escalated their child’s behavior and became a trigger, rather than be an effective way to increase desired behavior. One parent in Focus Group 3 posited that this may have to do with the public nature of the clip and suggested that it remain known only to the teacher until the end of the day. Another refuted, saying that children need to learn to receive public feedback as a life skill. Still others in the same focus group saw it from both sides, and acknowledged the dilemma:

I have [two children at this school]. One is the overachiever. She is on purple every day; if she gets clipped down, she's gonna bust her butt to bring home a purple. She's gonna make sure she has a good grade so when she's gonna come home she can say, ‘Momma this is what my color is.’ Then you have my [second child], ‘I got clipped down,’ and he got clipped down all day because that one clip down basically told him he was a mess up. And it goes back to each child is different. But, how can you, with all these students, how can you form a system when it comes to the colors because of emotions?... [My son’s] in third grade, and it's like, if he's not first, or if he didn't get this good grade, or if he got clipped down, it's the end of the world. It's like, he feels like, ‘I'm not good enough.’ And it's like, where do we find a happy medium with the color system?

Despite the widespread understanding of the clip chart system and accompanying mixed feelings (e.g., “I understand what [the school] is trying to do...I just feel that there is a

little kink in there somewhere,” Caregiver, Focus Group 3). Another debate surrounding the clip is if you should be able to move back up at all, or if you should only be able to move down and stay there:

The clip chart don't mean nothing, it just mean you move up, you move down. So, if you do good throughout the day you move up. So that means you let them go up and down with them all day, it don't make no sense...I don't know, I just think they have too much leeway. ‘Oh, you was on purple today, oh you skipped this, let's move you down to blue. Yeah you did good for lunch, let’s move you back to purple...’ I feel like if you got dropped, you got dropped (Caregiver, Focus Group 4)

Contrastingly, a parent in Focus Group 5 states, “I like that he knows when he started, like, you could always move up...and that motivates him.” This idea of motivation to move colors is referenced by a parent in Focus Group 6 as well: “Because then there's no incentive to do better if you're, ‘oh, I'm on red and it's 8:30 in the morning, I guess I'm gonna do whatever I want all day.’”

Caregivers and students seem to be implying that the clip can be both motivator and disincentive depending on the child. The question of how to create a universal system amidst competing individual needs begets the question of if that is even possible and contributes to the finding that stakeholders perceive school discipline as both paradoxical and complex. A related struggle that stakeholders seem to have is whether children will be more motivated to exhibit desired behaviors by working to earn rewards, by the fear of having positive things taken away, or by the threat of having a punishment given if they engage in undesired behaviors.

**I'm not going to be able to earn Fun Friday.** While reinforcement and punishment are both established processes for learning, positive reinforcement on a differential schedule yields the most promising outcomes (Miltnerberger, 2008). Perhaps this indicates a need for further training for both parents and teachers on principles of behavior and behavior modification. Some caregivers and students recognized that “small things like [earning a trophy] really push children to strive and do more for themselves” (Caregiver, Focus Group 1). A caregiver in Focus Group 2 said that “it just keeps him more aware and focused on, ‘okay, I have to make better choices, you know, or I’m on yellow now, I have to get to this because I know if I stay on yellow I’m not going to be able to earn Fun Friday, or I may not be able to, if I go home with this color I may not be able to play the game.’” What is interesting about this parent’s observation is that she frames it as a reminder for what he might NOT earn, if he “stays on yellow,” implying that though he can earn the “earn Fun Friday” class-wide celebration, it is not purely a reward, but instead a response-cost system where what you earn can be taken away.

This can be especially frustrating for students with frequent behavior infractions, because they can do well four out of five days in a week and then lose the reward on the last day, leading them to feel that their efforts were futile. As one second grade student puts it,

We earn stuff...like [name of school] bucks. And bucks help us get to Fun Friday but if you don’t bring your homework to class or something like that or school, you ain’t gonna have nothing and you gonna have to probably waste all your tickets.”

This calls into question, (a) the effectiveness of response-cost versus a purely positive reward system and (b) determining a schedule for earning something that is developmentally appropriate and evidence-based rather than calendar-based. Discussion of disciplinary approaches went beyond rewards and punishments to include caregiver comments comparing general differences in tone between PCES and the schools they attended as children.

**We didn't talk about our feelings.** This theme arose from the caregiver groups only. Caregivers contrasted this school's practices with their experiences growing up and seemed to prefer the current methods. Caregivers noted differences between how the current school approaches discipline and how they remember discipline in the schools when they were younger. A caregiver in Focus Group 2 said, "I think that they are just a lot more patient, you know, now, like especially with my son... I don't think that they may have been as patient ... you know, back then." A parent in Focus Group 3 also described the current school's actions as less harsh than schools in the past: "I agree with [what the school does], because when we grew up and went to school, you got suspended or they took you to the office and they paddled you. I don't want them touching my child." A parent in Focus Group 6 explained, "Now, [the school has] the patience to sit down and be like, 'okay, are we gonna be the problem or we gonna be the solution?' We couldn't even explain that back then, it was just paddle time. Once your mama sign that paper, it's paddle time." Physical discipline or exclusion were the sole practices mentioned as being used in the past:

Only thing they used to do, you would just get suspended. Every time you'd be bad or something like that, you would get put out, which didn't make sense to me.

I think [this school] is more lenient. I'm not saying they're more soft on them, but they're more lenient, more understanding. (Caregiver, Focus Group 5)

Some of the benefits of the current school's approach are outlined by another parent in Focus Group 3:

At one point somebody is like, 'where did these emotions come from?' [It used to be] it's either good or you just bad, now they actually have emotions, they express themselves...and it helps you be a better parent too, because at one point in time, you know, like you say when we growing up it's like, '[go] in a corner.' We didn't talk about our feelings, and I think that was missing a lot with some of the kids...You know, they're not able to express themselves, and now my son really expresses himself.

But the differences in emotional expression is not without complications, as another parent noted that teaching kids to express themselves also means that the school needs to be able to handle that expression, however it may manifest:

They're teaching them to be emotional, where we were not. They're really teaching them to be emotional, so if something is going on at home, something could be going on in class, you're teaching them to express themselves, and if they're in the classroom [and] they're expressing themselves, sometimes you have to remove them from the situation and talk to them.

This particular insight points out that if part of the school's approach is to teach children to communicate their emotions; they need to recognize that externalizing behavior is a method of such communication. The main purpose of social emotional instruction, however, is teaching children how to regulate their emotions and how to communicate



appropriately in order to have their needs met. If a child is removed for inappropriately expressing emotion (e.g., kicking, screaming) and their goal was to escape a situation, this form of expression has now been reinforced as effective. Caregivers do not specify that the current practice of allowing emotional expression is more effective, but the concept of safety is relevant in their perceptions of such generational differences. It was not an option to “explain” their feelings because they were being physically hit with a paddle or cut off from the school through suspension. Caregivers did not perceive any differentiation by student need, just these two options. When asked why school discipline might be different now, one suggested that it was a difference in the children that prompted a new approach.

I don't think the discipline so much has changed... I just think the kids have changed. I just think that, even the education, period, just the kids are different, so the things that may have worked for us doesn't necessarily work for them... honestly, I think they have a lot more mental issues going on now. Kids, they have a lot more that they're probably dealing with. I just think that the kids are different, not necessarily the discipline. (Caregiver, Focus Group 2)

The perception that children have more to face in their daily lives now may or may not be true and may also vary from child to child. Additionally, the caregivers' perception that the school is focused on listening to students and encouraging emotional expression is not shared by all of the students.

**Do a reflection and say sorry.** While caregivers describe the process in the discipline room one way, students have different perspectives, and are less sure of the benefits of the ODR procedures and reflections. They also insinuate that the talks with

disciplinarians can be harsh, rather than calming. A group of fourth graders discussed this together.

Student 1: [an ODR] doesn't help you it just makes you—

Student 2: it makes you angry. What would help is them talking calm.

Student 3: I feel that ODRs don't help me. They're not going to do nothing to help you. They just going to make you write, give it to your teacher, then they gonna throw it away... a reflection about what you did and how you could change it. But they don't do nothing with the reflection we do. They just throw it away...what's the point of doing a reflection and they gonna throw it away and nobody ain't gonna read it?

A kindergartener similarly stated that when disciplinarians “scream at us” it does not help and talking “nicely” does. Students of differing grade levels mention “screaming and hollering” by teachers, disciplinarians, and students in both the classroom and the discipline room. They also describe a general protocol of getting an ODR, walking to the room with a disciplinarian, writing a reflection, and calling parents. How students respond to each part of this influences how the next step unfolds. A fourth grader explained, “They make us do a reflection to calm down. If you're still being bad, they call your mama, if you're still being bad you go in the quiet room, if you still being bad then you get suspended.” A third grader reflected,

I think everyone gets treated the same, but it depends on the problem. Like if somebody was screaming, they would probably go in the quiet room. But another person, if they owned their actions that they were screaming, they would probably

get to sit down. But it depends on how they solve the problem and how they tried to tell the truth about the problem and what is the problem.

Again, the idea of individualization of discipline arises. The general procedure is the same but can be altered not only for different students based on their past responses, but in the moment, dependent on current responses.

Caregivers describe a similar protocol, but they do not mention screaming. It is also unclear if parents are always called after an ODR, or just depending on if the student continues to do “stuff” and has difficulty calming down. There is ambivalence about the effectiveness of the consequences applied and the consistency with which students can expect them. It seems clear when a student will get an ODR, but hazier about what will happen when they arrive. Will they be screamed at? Will their parents be called? Do they have control over this based on their own actions? The ability of the disciplinarians to be flexible with the process may be advantageous for meeting the different needs of children but may also create an unpredictable environment and leave room for bias.

Some students state that going to the discipline room can be helpful, but their developmental level seems to influence their ability to articulate why. Younger students seemed to more concretely say yes or no to whether the tactics actually help them, listing the actions as reasons, like, “[it helps because] because they gonna do a reflection and say sorry” (second grade student). A first grader is equally concrete in describing the ideal outcome, but not how students get there or why going to the discipline room helps: “It helps you, like you do, you start like learning. It helps you don’t hurt nobody and be nice to other kids and don’t be disrespectful.” As they age, they are more able to articulate why disciplinary actions help or do not help, such as the fourth grader who stated that an

ODR can help students because “sometimes they need time out of class.” Even this developmental pattern has exceptions, however, as kindergartners can be just as insightful: “because, like, if they would’ve had no adults [to help in the discipline room], if they would’ve had just children pretending like they grown-ups and when something bad happen, no adults gonna be there to handle the problem.” Exactly how adults at school and in the discipline room should handle the problem is still difficult for students and caregivers to decide on, as evidenced in the next section.

**Second tries, treats, and going home.** Caregivers value inquiry, talking through issues, and skill building, or more ‘soft skills’ as a part of the school discipline process. Students also found being spoken to calmly and being listened to as helpful. When discussing improvements that could be made to the current school practices, however, both groups drew from the past. Students generated ideas that were discipline practices already used at the school, and both groups had difficulty coming up with novel ideas when pressed about what should happen if the current practices are not effective at helping students. When presented with a scenario of a student exhibiting repeated dangerous behaviors, after going to the discipline room and talking and teaching appropriate emotional expression has been done, caregivers became stuck and reverted back to the school repeating the cycle of “take the child out of the room immediately,” “call the parent,” “find out what the problem is,” “investigating,” and eventually, “it’s time to go home.” Other preventive or long term ideas were generated, such as a mentoring program pairing older and younger students, therapy groups, psychological referrals, but when pressed for ideas for how to respond in the moment other than suspension, a caregiver in Focus Group 5 summed it up: “Truthfully, I don’t know.”

Students are similarly stuck. When asked for alternatives to suspension, a first grader suggested giving a student a “second try, and if you turned it around you could get a treat.” When another student questioned this idea, the first student admitted, “But sometimes it doesn’t work. Sometimes they get the treat and be bad again.” Other ideas for responding to behavior incidents included “talk to them,” “take a break,” “sitting [out at] recess,” “write a paper note for your teacher,” and “get a clip down.” Going to the discipline room, suspension, and even expulsion were also presented by students as options. Kindergarteners suggested suspension as a response to violence “so they could calm down.” A fourth grade student even said, “make a jail cell in the school” to show them what “happens in the real world if you throw a temper tantrum.” Another fourth grader said “they need to trash the ODRs, sorry” And when asked what would help instead, he stated, “they already got it: a Check-in Check-out” (Check-in Check-out is an evidence-based intervention where a school staff member “checks in” with a student every morning, reviewing specific goals and problem-solving barriers to meet those goals. The student gets written feedback on their performance relative to the goals throughout the day, and then “checks out” with the student to see how they did at the end of the day; Campbell & Anderson, 2011).

These suggestions that echo existing practices (except for the jail cell) or cycle through things that have already been done (e.g., talking, calling parents, removal) imply acceptance of current practices, but perhaps underscore a need for communication and collaboration between stakeholders to determine when and why each practice should be implemented. Additionally, continuous data collection and evaluation of effectiveness is also needed, given the lack of consensus over what works.

### **Allocation of Time**

Starting in spring 2018, the school set a goal of having each child who received an ODR back in class within thirty minutes. The disciplinarians began tracking the duration of students' time spent in the disciplinary room, and the times ranged from five to one hundred eighty minutes. During consultation meetings, disciplinarians reported that the duration depended on the individual student's level of emotional arousal (e.g., time it took for them to calm down), severity of infraction (e.g., they would not send a child back to class in fifteen minutes after a physical altercation), and availability of disciplinarians to work with the student to reflect on what happened and plan ahead for future situations (e.g., if there were a lot of students with ODRs at the same time or a student in crisis, students would have to wait, often exceeding the thirty minute time goal). In the focus groups, caregivers commented on how much they appreciated school staff taking the time to talk to children after a behavioral infraction, helping them to reflect and teaching them skills. This is at odds, however with their expression of concern about missing academic class time because of ODRs. Students also have conflicting views on the practices within the discipline room, with some finding them effective, while others view them as futile. The dilemma of how to allocate time to address the need for effective social emotional skill building versus the need for academic instruction will be presented through the themes taking the time and they are missing a lot.

**Taking the time.** Caregivers and students largely agree that taking the time to talk with a student and reflect is an effective and appropriate disciplinary practice. Caregivers repeatedly praised the school and the disciplinarians for doing this and

credited this practice with helping their children to express themselves and helping parents with parenting skills.

And, I feel like, [the school] plays a part in that, because they are helping us parent our children. They actually believe in our kids, and they take that time out, instead of just putting them in that category, 'well that's just a bad child...well that child comes from a broken home so we know that child's gonna act up' --- no! They don't take the disciplinary actions overboard. They do what they feel would benefit that child. It's not so much as benefitting the school, or benefiting them.

They actually want to see that child do better. (Caregiver, Focus Group 3)

Caregivers state that this is effective for their children. A parent from Focus Group 2 said that to help her child, they "have to talk him through it." Similarly, a caregiver from Focus Group 5 noted that this has improved her child's behavior: "[the school has] helped him a lot. They'll talk to him."

It is the school's practice of talking and reflecting with students after behavior infractions that parents really value. A caregiver in Focus Group 3 describes the actions and reactions for her son in detail:

Before they go to any extreme, let's talk about it. Let's reflect on what is going on. Tell me what happened. Like with [one of the disciplinarians], I love how he talks to [my son], he sits there, [son's name], do you know why you're in here? And then, he'll tell him, and he'll say well what made you do that? He'll express himself. He'll say, do you feel you could have handled it better. And he'll drop his head, "I could have." He says so, do you feel that you deserve to have a red today? "I do." He said, "I need to apologize." And, it's him taking that step, just to

talk and relate, and not belittle him, makes him come out of his shell and want to do better. So, I agree with their disciplinary a hundred percent.

A parent in Focus Group 1 lauds the school personnel for how they “break it down on their level...not just saying, ‘I treat my friends the way I want to be treated,’” but teaching children to be able to understand and articulate that, “it makes my friend feel sad when I hit him,” or “when my friend hits me, it makes me feel sad,” and to go beyond, “I get in trouble,” to “I’m sad and my feelings are hurt and then they don’t want to be my friend anymore and I want my friends.”

Students expressed the value of having adults take the time to talk them through things by citing specific examples. A fourth grader explained:

[Teacher name] made me notice that, because he was talking about graduation and stuff. Because at first, before 4th grade, I was a terrible, terrible kid. When I got home, I don’t want to do my homework. I threw my homework away once. My whole homework packet. When I got to 4th grade [teacher name] and me had a talk and I haven’t been bad.

A second student continued,

He talked about us doing graduation and stuff, and all the good things that’s going to happen when you graduate from college. He talked to us about going on field trips and he talk about some people going to summer school, and I said in my brain I was going to change my ways. Because I don’t want to go to summer school I want to have fun for summer.”

Another student clearly articulated their preference for a teacher who takes the time to talk with them when they are struggling:



My favorite teacher is [teacher name] because he always nice to us. When we're being bad, he talks us through what we does. [different teacher name], she's nice, but whenever we do something bad she is always screaming and yelling at us.

Some teachers are also modeling taking time to calm down, as described by a student.

"When you do something bad...[teacher name] she would have to take deep breaths and she would just have to calm herself down and then go back to teaching." Students also showed they valued teachers taking time with them by offering time-dependent solutions for what staff should do to help kids. "Talk to them," "take a break," "calm them down," were frequently heard as suggestions. One fourth grader advocates for other students to receive the time and talks that he has gotten this year:

Student: Yes, actually I flipped over a desk.

Interviewer: What do you think would have helped you at that time?

Student: [Teacher name] would've helped me at that time. He would've talked me through and told me what my life would have been like if I kept doing it. He's just a nice person. I think they should keep him at school for the next fourth graders so he can teach them what he taught me so they could be better--because I was bad but now I'm being good in school.

Student 2: Because some of the third graders and future fourth graders in third grade, some of them are bad and stuff. And I don't think the teachers tell them like [teacher name] do, like his motivational speech. He tells us about our lives and, uh, how Black people used to be treated, and if we keep doing that it's going to be just like they was when we could be achieving what our grandparents wanted us to achieve.

While both groups value school personnel taking time to talk with students and work with them in response to challenging behaviors, these procedures take a lot of time, and caregivers do not agree with students missing significant amounts of academic class time for ODRs.

**They are missing a lot.** When asked to tell about the disciplinarians at PCES, a second grader said, “They help people. They help people take their feedback and help them get back to learning right away.” While this reflects the ideal situation, it may not always be a reality. Students and caregivers noticed that having to go to the discipline room or having to “calm down” after an incident led to missed academic time. When asked why they thought they no longer went to the discipline room, a fourth grader responded, “I just decided. I get tired of going back there. I just notice that I’m not getting a lot of work done or an education. So that means I was just coming to school to be bad and do nothing.”

The loss of academic class time for time in the discipline room was especially pertinent to the caregivers in Focus Group 3. The impact of missed class was evident to a parent through homework:

My son comes home and he gets social studies. He's like, ‘how do I do that?’ and I say, ‘this is how I know when you got that ODR, because now you don't even know how to do your social studies.’ I can tell every time when he got the ODR when he do his homework.

Another parent was at a loss: “so he doesn’t have the answers to the next day, so I'm always sending a note, he doesn't need to get in trouble for this because he doesn’t know it, I don't know it, what are we supposed to do?”

The following sentiment was agreed upon by all participants in the group:

They're reflecting on what caused them to get in trouble. I appreciate the reflection time, but they need to cut it short, and whatever they were working on, bring it in with them, because like he said, they are missing a lot in that forty-five minutes to an hour because talking to my daughter, there are time blocks. They go through a lot of stuff. And so, if you're missing forty-five minutes to an hour, you're missing, like, two subjects.

Caregivers offered the idea of in-school suspension as a solution for this problem.

Ideally, many said, students would bring their classwork with them to the discipline room and get it done there so that they would not miss the work. One parent explained,

I understand that they get punished because I believe in that. I'm a firm believer that every action has a reaction, but in order for him to stay on track, and to learn what he needs to learn, okay send him out the classroom. Send him with his work. Because that needs to be done.

Although almost every parent across groups agreed with this idea, one parent in Focus Group 3 articulated the dilemma perfectly: "I was saying that, but here's my thing: so if a student is doing all of that, then my question is, how do you get them back into the classroom?" In other words, if students are to be doing classwork in the discipline room, when can they do the social emotional work? The idea that academic work can be done in the discipline room and this will alleviate the problem does not acknowledge that social emotional skills are not separate from academics but may be a necessary prerequisite for getting the academic work done.

Consultant observation notes show that sometimes students do have classwork with them in the discipline room, but if they are angry or upset, they may need time to calm down first, and the work may be ripped up and destroyed in the process. Or, difficulty with the work may be the root cause of the externalizing behavior in the first place. Either way, observations show that students are often unable to complete the work independently. With disciplinarians busy working with other students on reflections and helping them calm down, they cannot always help the students with academic work, leading to more frustration on the part of the student. The dilemma of how to allocate time was found in consultant meeting notes as well. Administrators wanted to address social emotional learning in professional development sessions, but also had to provide training on academic instruction and student test data analysis.

### **Discussion**

Using ecological and critical race theory frameworks, this phenomenological study aimed to listen to stakeholder voices to understand how students and caregivers experience school discipline practices in order to help determine culturally valid and ecologically sound disciplinary interventions in the future. Focus groups were conducted with 22 students and 14 caregivers at a public charter elementary school serving primarily African American students. The sample included participants whose experiences with school discipline practices ranged from those who have never received an office discipline referral to those who have received over 75 in one year, and a corresponding group of caregivers. Responses were analyzed inductively. Themes were grouped into three main dilemmas that the stakeholders are facing with regard to school discipline: the appropriate roles for school and family, the type of consequence to use,

and how time should be allocated for different types of disciplinary responses. How these findings relate to the existing literature, the framing theories, limitations, and implications for the future will be discussed below.

### **Findings in the Context of Existing Literature**

Extant research notes that stakeholder groups perceive school discipline differently from one another (e.g., Thorson, 1996; Kreutter, 1983; Miller, Ferguson, & Byrne, 2000). Inclusion of the parent and child perspectives adds nuance to arguments over discipline, particularly exclusionary forms. The findings in this study do not clearly show this between-group difference in perception, but rather that there is actually within-participant difference, as individuals struggle to weigh pros and cons of discipline practices themselves. This inner conflict or ambivalence is not described in previous research on perspectives of discipline, but is addressed in other contexts, such as the Transtheoretical model of change and applied in such therapies as motivational interviewing (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Miller & Rose, 2015). The relationship between three main dilemmas found within the data and the existing literature will be discussed below.

**Roles of school and home.** In the school community studied here, the relationship between caregivers and the school was reported to be supportive and characterized by open lines of communication. While parents acknowledged difficulties related to disciplinary practices, they mostly lauded the school for how they dealt with each child with care and kept parents informed. Way (2011) discussed the need for students to perceive school authority as legitimate, and noted that if they do not, noncompliance could increase. The data in this study indicate, however, a more nuanced

view of the relationship between school and child that does not lend itself to dichotomous conceptualizations of authority: legitimate or not. Here, the issues of roles and boundaries was being worked out in real-time by some of the participants. Caregivers tended to grant the school legitimacy based on the quality of relationship between school personnel and the family but would rescind and revisit this decision after a disciplinary incident if they disagreed with the action of the teacher or disciplinarian. Children shared that they believe teachers give consequences because they care about them but were clear that this did not apply to all teachers and staff. The issue of legitimate authority is perhaps more fluid than previously explored, and is dependent on contextual factors, that in this school, include the specific incident, which school staff member is assessing or assigning the consequence, and what their relationship with the family is like. The factors that stakeholders include in their assessment of discipline legitimacy could have implications for policy and practice at the school level. Staff may not realize what students consider to be caring versus not, or what actions caregivers find disagreeable. The findings from a study such as this one provide potential answers for schools and a path to follow to find out more.

While extant literature did not explicitly discuss roles of families and school staff in comparison to one another, Williams and Bryan (2012) and Thorson (1996) described examples of students finding motivation to achieve in school from their parents. This was reflected in some student responses in the current study, though children sometimes framed it more as a way to avoid parental punishment, rather than to receive parental praise. The focus on punishment over praise could be due to the age and developmental level of the students in this study, as it is consistent with an expected pre-conventional

level of moral development for middle childhood. Hearing the student perspectives and delving deeper into the role of parent as motivator for students could inform discussions between the stakeholder groups as new policies and roles are developed. The results of this study add to the existing knowledge base by raising the idea that the roles of stakeholders in discipline is not clearly outlined for caregivers or students, yet their distinction or conflation plays a huge part in the perception of each incident.

**Type of consequence to use.** When it comes to discipline, studies show that the majority of teachers and parents still support harsh exclusionary practices (e.g., “zero tolerance” policies; Way, 2011), even though exclusionary discipline as a whole has been shown to be ineffective (Public Agenda, 2004). The data in this study extends this, in that parents and children perceive exclusionary discipline as effective and acceptable, contingent on how the consequences are structured. Parents and children are not demonizing or exalting exclusion – they are advocating that exclusionary consequences be educational (i.e., for there to be a lesson through skill building or loss of privileges) and enforceable (not solely parent-dependent).

Additionally, Phelan et al. (1992) and Murphy, Acosta, and Kennedy-Lewis (2013) found that middle and high school students wanted teachers to listen to them. The elementary school students in this study felt the same. Children wanted to be spoken to “calmly” and to be able to explain themselves caregivers wanted adults to take the time to hear their children’s side of the story. Understanding that this occurs at the elementary level can help to remind schools and researchers that these young voices still have strong desires to be heard.

Both stakeholder groups in this study had strong, but often ambivalent, feelings about the main school-wide behavior chart, known as the “clip chart.” This was a new finding that may not have been prominent in previous studies because such systems are usually found in elementary schools. The ideas of publicly administered consequences and issues with consistency of implementation are not new, however (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy, 2013; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Students in previous studies preferred private feedback, but some of the students and caregivers in the present study reported that the clip chart worked as a way to improve their behavior. This is a case where further data from clip chart use would be helpful to compare the perceptions of effectiveness to actual behavioral change.

**Allocation of time.** It's clear from the findings that PCES and parents view discipline with the ambivalence of the term's own definition. Both punishment for obedience and training by instruction are valued and implemented, but caregivers are unsure how to reconcile the two given the academic demands occurring simultaneously in the classroom. The literature notes that integration of instruction like SEL has a positive effect on academic performance (Durlak et al 2011). This study reveals that caregivers view SEL as important, but also view it as wholly distinct from academics. This distinction was particularly evident in discussions of student time allocation (i.e., what should students be doing during the school day or when being disciplined). Perhaps because they conceive SEL as wholly distinct from academics, parents see any time allocated to SEL as taking time away from core academic subjects. This is reinforced by the school and the school structures—separate class time for SEL, teachers by subject (e.g., reading is necessary for math, math is necessary for science, etc....but we separate



them as specializations); and discipline is a specialization for a disciplinarian. But the child is a whole child. Sometimes a student's undesired behavior is caused by frustration at not being able to do the work, or the child is too frustrated or angry about something else to focus on the work. The ability to regulate these strong emotions and to manage their behavior is a prerequisite to their engagement with core academic subject matter. The focus groups conducted for this study show that caregivers see both as SEL and academics as important, but as a zero-sum-game where time given to one takes away time from another. Without understanding the caregivers' perspective – their shared view of the relationship between these elements of instruction - schools cannot address the tension between the competing desires of parents to have a child not miss core academic work and to receive social-emotional instruction in a discipline room. This depth of understanding allows for more meaningful communication between stakeholders and is a key to sustainable implementation (Nastasi et al., 2004). Teachers and administrators feel similar pulls from both sides and working together with all stakeholders may be a way forward in coming up with a solution (Cornell, 2017).

**Developmental level.** Conducting research on the perspectives of elementary-age children raises questions of ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate both their own behavior and adult responses to it. Given the ages of student participants ranges from five to ten years of age, it could be assumed that their moral development would be in the pre-conventional level of instrumental-relativist: motivated by right versus wrong and associated rewards (Kohlberg, 1966). Surprisingly, the responses of students in this study, despite presumed developmental level, were more complex than expected for the age group. There were instances of actions seeking to escape punishment or gain reward,

but there were also responses indicating development at the conventional level, seeking to follow the rules or enact disciplinary practices for the good of the school or classroom as a whole.

### **Findings in the Context of Theoretical Frameworks**

This study was conducted because of the importance of elevating oft-overlooked voices in research and involving multiple stakeholders in decisions about children's lives, including themselves. These points are outlined in Critical Race Theory (CRT), Ecological Systems Theory (EST), and Phenomenological Variant of EST (P-VEST). Findings related to each theory are discussed below.

**Critical Race Theory.** A critical race theory orientation underscores the importance of qualitative investigation that allows students (and caregivers) to tell their own stories of experiences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). By capturing the stories of parents of African American children and of the children themselves this study gives voice to a population that has been largely ignored in extant scholarship. The assumption has been that discipline practices are sources of conflict between teachers, parents, and students; this study shows this assumption to be only partially explanatory. The counter story revealed in the data is not one of blanket, dualistic antagonism between caregivers and teachers, or of complete rejection of exclusion. It is a story of permission for disciplinary action being given to people who earn a caregiver and child's trust. This seems consistent with the findings of Rowley, Helaire, and Banerjee (2009) that the African American mothers in their sample were less involved in their child's schooling if they had experienced racial discrimination in their own schooling but perceived high quality relationships with their child's current teacher. Rowley et al. (2009) posit that

they may trust the teachers more, and therefore feel less of a need to be involved. The highest level of involvement was found when African American mothers had experienced racial discrimination as a child and perceived a poor quality relationship with their child's teacher, and may have felt the need to intervene to protect them (Rowley et al., 2009). The predominantly African American caregivers in the present study reported similar feelings of allowing school personnel to enact disciplinary actions (rather than the broader construct of school involvement), but intervening as soon as they perceived unfair treatment or inadequate investigation into the incidents. It must be acknowledged, however, that race was not explicitly mentioned in either the questions asked or the answers given during the focus groups. The limitations and implications of this are discussed further below.

Another key point of CRT applied to education is the idea of curricula as property, and the right to access rich and varying learning experiences within schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The findings in the present study show that access to curricula and experiences is a high priority for caregivers and students. Students want to be able to attend "Fun Friday" and not "miss the learning," and conversely, do not want to be yelled at when in the discipline room. Caregivers are extremely conscious of the amount of time in the classroom lost when a student is excluded, either for OSS or an ODR. This is countered by their desire for school personnel to use high-quality practices when disciplinary incidents occur, which can be often time-consuming (such as taking the time to talk through incidents and emotions with the student). In sum, findings show that participants want both, but are not always getting access to rich learning experiences

both in the discipline room and in the classroom, due to the current mutual exclusivity of the settings.

**EST and PVEST.** The findings in the present study exemplify the interaction between systems beyond the individual student, and show that caregiver and student perspectives are unique. Caregivers and school staff within the microsystems are involved in nearly every discipline incident at the school and are interacting with each other, the individual, and the exosystem layer of the school as a whole each time an incident occurs. For example, caregivers and children described ambivalence towards the clip chart, which is a school-wide system that each classroom is required to implement. Hearing these perspectives could cause the system to reconsider or modify this practice to better address the concerns. Similarly, exclusionary discipline is often part of school-wide policies, and findings that it is acceptable to students and caregivers are important for the system to consider when implementing policy and practical change. Macrosystem values and beliefs about childhood and parent responsibilities were not neatly unified as they seem in visual depictions of EST. Questions of whether certain practices were too flexible or too strict arose, and stakeholders acknowledgement that school and parent roles are often conflated, no matter how much either group wanted to clearly delineate them. The importance of the chronosystem was also underscored by caregivers' comparisons between school discipline in their generation and that of their children. As time has passed, formerly acceptable practices such as paddling have fallen out of favor in most public education settings. Also, developmental differences across grade levels were somewhat apparent, but not as prevalent as expected. Though the youngest participants did provide some concrete responses focused on the ideas of "good" and

“bad,” they also reflected on why certain actions were taken and showed an understanding of the underlying motives of school personnel. The phenomenological variant of EST was evident throughout, as stakeholders appraised not only the actions of the school, but themselves. The focus groups provided an opportunity for such appraisals, and because of this, children and caregivers thought critically about disciplinary actions at the school and were able to articulate their dilemmas.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Research**

**Limitations.** One limitation is the temporal distance between the child and caregiver focus groups. The student groups were conducted at the end of the 2017-18 school year, while the caregiver groups were done during the 2018-19 school year, after the school moved to a new building and had some turnover of disciplinarians. Since both groups discussed the impact of relationships with school personnel and individual approaches, a change in disciplinary staff could heavily influence perceptions of the practices. This underscores the importance of school-wide discipline policy moving forward, so that procedures are not as person-dependent, and rather, provide for training, coaching, and accountability for all staff on relationship building and discipline approaches deemed effective by data and stakeholders.

Racial bias was not raised as an issue by the stakeholders. This could be because of the lead researcher’s identity as White and the lead disciplinarian’s identity as Black, because it was not asked about directly, or because they did not find it relevant in this context; we do not know. This is a major limitation to this study. A main framework of this study being CRT, a large justification was the importance of providing opportunities for African American families to engage in counter-storytelling that would likely include

experiences of racial injustice, given what is known about racial inequities and discrimination in school discipline. The participant stories and experiences have been filtered through consultant and school staff question design, and again through White researchers' analysis. While attempts to use participant quotes and direct language and other measures of trustworthiness, future studies would benefit from a more participatory approach that includes students and caregivers in all steps of the process from design to analysis and through dissemination with issues of race considered throughout.

Qualitative research is designed for contextualized study, and thus has limited generalization to other settings. What studies such as this one do provide, however, is the possibility of transferability. With the detailed description of the current context, researcher experiences, and methods, the reader of the study has the necessary information to determine if the results are applicable to their own setting. Additionally, these details provide the opportunity for transfer of the process across settings. This means that the process of conducting focus groups with students and caregivers could be conducted again at this school site or at another using the outlined procedures. It is hoped that PCES and other schools will be able to repeat this process annually with resources already available to the school. One limitation of this is the availability of a consultant or consultation team, however, the university partnership model used here could be one avenue for other schools to explore.

**Implications for practice.** Ambiguity of roles is something that is a problem in many organizations, beyond just schools. What is interesting about the school setting as opposed to a business is that there is much more overlap between producer (teacher) and consumer (parent and student). Models exist for how to collaborate on role delineation

and overlap, something that schools and parents could develop together and present at the beginning of each school year. This has been done at some schools, within the same organization as the school in the study, in the form of parent, teacher, and student contracts that outline expectations for each. What these lack is input from each group on what should be included and how discipline fits in.

While caregivers see lots of communication between the school and home, the communication is limited to individual disciplinary incidents, rather than systemic sharing of input. Communicating ideas for what different groups' roles could be in discipline systems and incidents could alleviate ambiguity and potentially assist in improving consistency and effectiveness. Questions to be addressed during collaboration may include: What actions at school warrant disciplinary action? Who will decide what happens in the moment following a child's behavioral infraction? Who needs to participate in this action? After the roles and procedures are outlined, it must be determined when and how stakeholders (including students) will be trained for their roles (e.g., trained/prepared to investigate, determine effective consequences and implement them). Additionally, reasoning behind each of these answers needs to be carefully outlined to ensure acceptability and sustainability for future school personnel, caregivers, and students.

Given the young age of students in this study, it is also likely that they are influenced by their caregiver's perceptions of the school's authority. The results paint a complex picture of authority through the discussion of roles. Parents are deemed responsible, and children see parental response as important, but both groups also see the school as simultaneously fulfilling a familial role. With the findings indicating a

conflation of teacher as family and family as teacher, collaboration and coordination is imperative. An ambiguity of roles could make things unclear and lead to confusion about who decides on disciplinary actions and who is responsible for enforcing them. Expected responses of the other group could fall through the cracks, leading some children to receive punishment for actions, while others do not, something noted by students in the data. This could also make it easy to place blame on the other group: “well, the parents didn’t do anything,” or “the school was unfair.” While this is certainly possible and currently happens, a conflation of roles does not have to be a negative. Similar to the adage, “it takes a village,” seeing all adults in a child’s life as both teacher and family could also be an opportunity for caregivers and school personnel to unite on agreed upon strategies implemented with consistency across settings. The process of conducting focus groups provides a starting point for such school-home collaboration. Using participatory methods that include all stakeholders throughout the process would allow for caregivers, students, and school staff to co-construct discipline programs that are appropriate for their school. In the case of PCES, this would include exploring the option of in-school suspensions, as well as what would need to be in place to allow for social-emotional learning after a disciplinary infraction without the child losing excessive academic time.

The findings in this study also included perceptions caregivers had of parenting in other students’ families. Caregivers assigned a lot of responsibility for student behavior to “what their parents allow” and how much they “care,” citing that many other parents not present in the focus groups may be doing a less effective job at disciplining their children. Recruitment measures using ODRs and school staff identification of parents with a range of involvements was meant to mitigate the potential for the participants to be



the group “that comes to everything.” An alternative explanation could be that caregivers have less access to other caregivers’ values and emotions, which may make it easier to assume that one “cares” more than someone else. More opportunities for caregiver sharing and collaboration, such as continued focus groups and support groups at PCES, could help caregivers build understanding, trust, and support.

Additionally, caregivers and students are concerned about access to classroom instruction while also having in high-quality social emotional learning experiences in the discipline room. PCES could discuss this further with the participatory focus groups, and develop plans for efficient and effective practices that minimize time out of the classroom. This may require rethinking staffing, ODR procedures, and protocols within the discipline room and within the classrooms.

**Future directions for research.** The value of this project could be extended by including more caregiver voices. Though saturation was reached, it is possible that a group of parents unable to attend one of the focus group days could have raised new ideas. It would also be helpful to repeat this process with school personnel and compare responses from that group.

The results of this study were highly specific to this school site and comparing results across schools could help determine factors that are effective at achieving certain outcomes for parents, teachers, and students. Continued qualitative studies with elementary students and caregivers are recommended to increase the presence of these voices in the educational and psychological literature. Focus groups and interviews will help to illuminate more of the stakeholder ambivalence found in this study. In many

psychological scales, discrepant responses contribute to a consistency index, which can lead to a warning that the results should be “interpreted with caution” because the rater has given different ratings to items that are usually rated similarly. The findings of this study show that there may be more to these contradictory responses than confusion or a mistake. Caregivers and students gave context for why a certain action could be acceptable in some situations but not in others. Further inquiry may lead to important discoveries that could add value to the understanding of the effects of school discipline on families and students. What this is showing is the cognitive process of stakeholder evaluation of practices. Further study of this may provide implications for school wide practices, such as the cognitive dissonance addressed directly in the practice of motivational interviewing.

Using dilemmas as a way to present themes to understand perspectives enabled the identification of instances where ambiguity was present. Instead of simply including multiple perspectives, it is important to consider where contradictions between perspectives take place to identify crucial differences. For example, findings highlighted that some caregivers and children see the clip chart as effectively motivating children towards exhibiting positive behaviors while others find it triggers anger and aggression, a possible point of contention and therefore, future collaboration. Qualitative researchers are often overwhelmed with the amount of rich, thick (Lincoln & Guba, 1984) data they have to parse through. By foregrounding ambivalence inherent in the data, this paper focuses on where the different perspectives encounter internal and external ambiguities and problems (Dimmock, 1999; Winter, 1982). Future research could extend the current

findings by asking stakeholders directly about the dilemmas presented here or others they experience related to school discipline.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, this study reveals the importance of capturing and understanding not just the perspectives of individuals participating in a school community, but of understanding the nature of their interactions and the depth of teacher-caregiver-student relationships.

Few studies provide an opportunity to engage parent and elementary student voices about discipline. What we have gained by doing this is an increased understanding of the desire to be heard, and by extension, valued, even when you (or your child) have done something “wrong.” This is truly what we strive for as the purpose of schooling, to help children grow into adults who think, know, and act as if they matter in this world. In order to do this, schools will need to change their own dichotomous view of classroom management and instructional practices as separate entities, and to work with parents

This study used a phenomenological approach because it is a form of deep learning that can be transformative for the participants, the study site, and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and it was. One of the greatest assets of action research is that the process of the research itself can become intervention. Providing children and caregivers with a safe space to share confidentially, on a day off, removed from the strong emotional responses that so often surround discipline in schools, allowed for time to reflect and express. Caregivers were grateful for the opportunity, and overall expressed pride in belonging to the school community. Students, thrilled with adult attention, thought critically about these issues, sometimes questioning their original answers when challenged by researchers or each other. Some even thanked the researchers for the

opportunity to share. As stated in the introduction, we so often do things to or for caregivers and children, and this small exercise in data collection was able to provide the beginnings of empowerment, as a first step of doing things together, emphasizing that their thoughts and perceptions matter.

This study was designed in a partnership model, with the researchers collaborating with school personnel to plan something that would be useful and that could propel their discipline systems forward. Ideally, the messages from student and parent voices will lead to their future inclusion in study design, evolving into a participatory research partnership. A focus of the dissemination will be on how students and caregivers would like to be included in discipline decision-making in the future, and on how the researchers can support the school in including stakeholder voices in future school endeavors. How does this inform policy? At the school level, the process for gathering caregiver and student perceptions has been laid out in this study, and the research team continues to work with the school to create a feasible plan for sustainable annual continuation. At the broader level, continued research evaluating acceptability and effectiveness of discipline at schools that use such a process could help to broaden the reach to other schools, districts, and eventually, governmental levels.

Discipline is frequently thought of as behavioral contingencies: if you do this, then you will get that. However, the experiences of children and caregivers in this study show that there is a cognitive component to discipline as well. A subset of education researchers in the 1980s began to frame the contradictions and ambiguities they observed in school settings as dilemmas; dilemmas that school leaders and teachers faced daily between micro- as well as macrosystemic issues. It has been said that teachers make as

many split second decisions per day as air traffic controllers. School personnel are weighing pros and cons, balancing personal and professional values, and individual versus collective needs constantly. These dilemmas from teacher and administrator perspectives were often the subject of conversations during the consultation years at PCES. While long-term researchers and consultants in schools more commonly hear the inner struggles and debates of teachers due to the nature of the work being more akin to school employees, they may rarely get to this level of depth with caregivers and students to hear about the inner conflicts they are wrestling with. While the focus groups conducted as a part of the consultation did not explicitly present dilemmas and ask for comment, as some past dilemma research has done (e.g., Dimmock, 1999), the competing needs and values within participants became apparent naturally in the process. Parents want the best for their kids, but parents also care about the school community. Kids want to stand up for themselves to bullies, but they do not want to get into trouble for fighting. Everyone wants to succeed academically and socially, but how can schools balance the time? The dilemmas in schools are not ones that will likely be solved, but are instead, a frame that we can use to understand the complexities of schooling (Winter, 1982). Complexities we can clearly see are present for caregivers and students as well. Stakeholders are thinking about these practices, and the nuances that transcend the contingencies. Is this fair? When is it fair? In what context will exclusion work and when will it not? If schools are to engage in a cultural shift in discipline, changing from exclusion to more restorative, it is going to require cognitive, behavioral, and emotional change, and all stakeholders will need to have a voice and opportunity to engage in this cognitive change together.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Dear Parents & Guardians,

At [PCES], we are committed to providing the best support possible for your family and your child. In order to do so and improve our support, we are asking for student and parent feedback on our school discipline procedures and how we respond to student behaviors. This spring, we will be meeting with students in small groups to find out what they think about the current procedures at school, and how we can improve them. It is our hope that the information from students will help us to better understand the difficulties faced by students and how we might better help them to face those difficulties at school. Later on, we hope to hold these groups with parents for feedback as well.

If you agree that your child can take part in this, they will be asked to:

- Participate in a group interview with 4 to 6 other students on one or more occasions for about one-hour each during the school day (most likely pulled from [specials] class to miss as little academic time as possible). The interview will involve talking about behavior at school and what happens when someone “gets in trouble.”
- Students may be selected for an individual interview to further explain what they said in the group.
- We will be holding at least one group per grade level, with the goal of hearing from 25-30 students. Partners from [ ] University will be conducting the groups and interviews.
- In order to make sure we do not miss anything the students say we will be using an audio-recorder during the group meetings. However, your child’s name will never be used and your child will never be identified individually. The audio-recordings will be deleted once we have transferred them onto paper.

In every interview, we are going to talk with the children about the importance of keeping what we talk about confidential.

It is possible that being in this project might lead your child to think about situations that are upsetting, such as bullying or reminds them of a time they got in trouble and makes them feel bad. If your child has particular concerns that affect their well-being in school, we will provide you with this information as well as where you can seek help, either through the school or in the community.

If you have any questions about these interviews, please feel free to reach out to [Assistant Principal] 555-555-5555 or [Principal] 555-555-5555.

**Please initial one of each pair of options.**

\_\_\_\_\_ I **consent** to have my child participate in this group activity and individual interview

\_\_\_\_\_ I do **NOT** consent to have my child participate in this group activity and individual Interview

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Child's Name: Please print)

(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent or Legal Caregiver)

(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_ I am interested in being contacted to participate in a parent focus group later

## Appendix B

The ecomap protocol used in this study is based on methodology from an international study of psychological well-being that included schools in the city where this study took place (see Nastasi & Borja, 2016; Nastasi, Borja, & Summerville, 2018).

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL-Student

#### 1) INTRODUCTION (Small group)

Thank you for helping us today. We are trying to learn about how kids your age think and feel about rules and consequences at school. We hope today will be fun for everyone.

While you are with us in this group, it is important that you understand that this is a safe place. Whatever anybody says today will be confidential. That means we all agree that we won't tell anyone else what people say in this meeting today. Do you all agree?

The only exceptions would be if someone says something about hurting themselves, hurting others, or someone else trying to hurt them. Then we would have to ask for help because we want to make sure that everyone is safe. But no matter what, you won't get in trouble at school for anything you say in here today. We are going to share ideas that you talk about today, but we won't tell anyone who said what. For example, we might say, "some scholars felt like it was unfair when..." But we would never say "Diamond said this...or Jamal said that..."

To start, you are going to draw a special kind of picture. You will draw yourself and people who are important to you at school. We will help you with your drawings.

#### 2) CHILD DRAWS SELF (Small group):

For the first part of our activity, draw a picture of yourself in the middle of this paper.

#### 3) CHILD DRAWS OTHERS ON ECOMAP (Small group):

For the next part of our activity, you will be drawing other people at school who are important to you. (*show example*)

Adults and kids can both be in the drawing. You can have a few people or many people. It is up to you. What kinds of people do you think can be in the drawing?" (*Elicit 4-5 verbal responses from the group, emphasizing that everyone has different people who are important to them.*)

It is okay if you get an idea from your friend. For example, you might notice that your friend has the art teacher in her picture. You might think, "Oh yeah! I love my art teacher! I'm going to put my art teacher on there!" But if you don't have art or know the art teacher, should you draw the art teacher? Just make sure everyone who is on your drawing is important to YOU.

Another REALLY important thing: The people do not have to be people that you like—they just have to be important people—you can have good or bad feelings about them. I know that this child (*reference Sample Ecomap A*) gets mad at her friend from school, but she is still on the drawing because she spends time with her. And this child (*reference Sample Ecomap B*) thinks his teacher says mean things sometimes, but the teacher is still on the drawing because he sees him a lot or thinks about him a lot.

As we talk more, you may realize that there are other people at school that you want to add to your picture, and that's fine! As long as they're important to you.

#### 4) QUESTIONS:

- How do you feel about school? (reference feelings chart)
  - Do you feel safe at school? Why/Why not?
- What are the values/rules of this school? (ask both/explain as needed)
  - What do they mean?
- What happens if someone breaks a rule? (How do you know this will happen?)
- Read Scenario: *let's pretend we're in your classroom and a scholar is calling out when the teacher is talking. What happens?*
- *Let's say their clip gets moved down, and they get up, grab the clip off the chart, and throw it towards the scholars in the class.*
  - What happens?
  - Is it the same in each classroom?
  - How do you feel about this consequence (is it fair/unfair)?
  - What do you think should happen? (What would you do if you were the teacher?)
- What are reasons that scholars get sent to [the office]?
  - Is it fair/unfair?
- Have you been to [the office] before?
  - How do you feel about that?
  - How many times have you been, do you think?
- What happens when you go?
  - Is it the same every time? (is it the same with each adult?)
  - How do you know?
  - What do you think should happen in [the office] ?
- How do you feel when you're there?
- How does going to [the office] help you?
- Do they treat every student the same?
- Do the adults in Indiana care about you/other scholars?
  - How do you know?
- Do the adults in school care about you?
  - How do you know?
- (*Introduce ecomap coding stressful/supportive/ambivalent*)
- How comfortable do you feel talking to an adult at school when you make a mistake?
  - Who would you talk to?

- Can you give an example of a time you felt comfortable
  - uncomfortable?
- When you make a mistake, what do you think should happen?
  - Can you give an example of when that happened?
  - When it didn't happen?
- What do you wish the person would have said?
- Has anyone else ever asked you for your opinion/thoughts about what should happen when a scholar makes a mistake?
- Would you like them to?
- How do you feel about suspensions?
  - Do they help kids? Why/why not?
- What helps you get back on track/do better when you break a rule?
  - Who?
  - What's not helpful?

## Appendix C

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL-Caregiver

#### 1) INTRODUCTION (Small group)

“Thank you for helping us today. We are trying to learn about how caregivers of kids at this school think and feel about rules and consequences at school. Please enjoy the food and drink while we talk.”

“We want this group to feel like a safe place to express your opinions. Whatever anybody says today will be confidential, and your names and any other identifying information will not be shared with school administrators or anyone else. We are going to share ideas that you talk about today so that the school can improve their systems, but we won’t tell anyone who said what. For example, we might say, “some parents felt like it was unfair when...” But we would never say “Ms. Jones said this...or so-and-so’s dad said that...”

The only exceptions would be if someone says something about hurting or neglecting a child, then we would have to make a report to DCFS because we want to make sure that everyone is safe.

#### 2) QUESTIONS:

- How do you feel about this school overall?
  - Do you feel that your child(ren) is (are) safe at school? Why/Why not?
- What are the values/rules of this school, as you understand them? (ask both/explain as needed)
  - What do they mean?
- What has been your experience with how the school teaches behavioral expectations/rules?
- What has been your experience with how the school reacts when a student does not meet behavioral expectations?
  - Or, do you feel like you know what happens if someone breaks a rule? (How do you know this will happen?)
- Is it the same every time?
- Read Scenario: *let’s pretend we’re in your child’s classroom and a student is calling out when the teacher is talking.*
  - What do you think happens?
  - How do you feel about this consequence (is it fair/unfair)?
  - What do you think should happen? (What would you do if you were the teacher?)
  - What if it was your child?
- *Let’s say their clip gets moved down, and they get up, grab the clip off the chart, and throw it towards the scholars in the class.*
  - What do you think happens?
  - How do you feel about this consequence (is it fair/unfair)?
  - What do you think should happen? (What would you do if you were the teacher?)

- What if it was your child?
- What do you know about “being sent to the office” at this school?
- What have you experienced in terms of the school behavior intervention room?
  - What are reasons that students get sent there?
  - Is it fair/unfair?
  - Have you met the interventionists?
- How comfortable do you feel talking to an adult at this school when your child receives an office referral or ISS or OSS
  - Who would you talk to?
  - Can you give an example of a time you felt comfortable
  - uncomfortable?
- What do you wish the person would say when you talk to them?
- Has anyone else ever asked you for your opinion/thoughts about what should happen when a scholar breaks a rule?
  - Would you like them to?
- What do you think is the purpose of school disciplinary actions?
- How do you feel about suspensions (in and out of school) and ODRs?
  - Do they help kids? Why/why not?
- How often do you and your child talk about behavior at school? (theirs or others)
  - Who brings it up?
- What helps your child get back on track/do better when they break a rule?
  - Who?
  - What's not helpful?

### Biography

Laura Cornell is currently completing her clinical internship at the National Center for School Mental Health in Baltimore, Maryland. She is a doctoral candidate in school psychology at Tulane University with a specialization in trauma. Laura has worked as a teacher, school administrator, and clinician in the public school system in New Orleans, Louisiana over the past fifteen years. She obtained her Master of Education degree from National-Louis University, and is a National Board Certified Teacher, as an exceptional needs specialist. Her research and clinical interests focus on creating sustainable, integrated mental health systems in schools and including caregiver and student perspectives throughout the process.