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Administrators' Perceptions of Alternatives to Suspension in Virginia Urban Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

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by

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of the use of alternatives to suspension of high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools. The phenomenological research design allowed better understanding of the participant's view and perception of their use of alternatives to suspension. While there is research focusing on the use of alternatives to suspension, there has been little research in Virginia urban public schools on the perceptions of administrators on the use of alternatives to suspension. The framework this research study utilized to focus the data analysis was Social Learning Theory.

 Data collection strategies included individual, semi-structured interviews, and document review. Analysis of data occurred in three phases: (a) open and axial coding themes from participant responses during interviews, (b) analysis of field notes, and (c) re-examination of the data. The analysis of the phenomenological study was based on the theoretical proposition that the perception of the person assigning the consequence after an incident influences the impact, change, and outcome. The credibility of the analysis was protected by triangulation of data through the coding of interviews and member checking.

The results revealed four categories emerged to include: (1) knowledge and awareness of alternatives to suspension, (2) perceived effectiveness and impact, (3) implementation challenges and barriers, and (4) policy and legal considerations. Based on the research, recommendations were made for professional practice to support and improve the responses to student behavior by administrators in urban Virginia public schools.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family. You all have supported, encouraged, and loved me every step of the way. I could not have finished this without your sacrifice, support, and unwavering love. Your love and support are more than I deserve. I hope this inspires each of you to do hard things and accomplish your goals.

To my friends, who encouraged and remained steadfast, you all helped me stay focused and kept me going throughout this process. I cherish your friendships and how you all have helped shape this work.

I also dedicate this to the students and families I am honored to serve, teach, guide, counsel, and support each day. My wish is for you to exceed your goals and make this world a better place.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This study examined urban high school administrators' perspectives and utilization of alternatives to suspension. Responding to disciplinary incidents is critical for building level administrators, teachers, and staff. Discipline responses and consequences provide different functions and effects for students, parents/guardians, and staff. Suspension, other exclusionary discipline, and zero tolerance policies are not effective (Gregory, 2009; Novak, 2022; Skiba, 2000). In addition, the use of suspensions, especially on culturally and socioeconomically diverse students, is disproportionate compared to their white peers (Gregory, 2009; Martinez, 2009; Novak, 2022; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). There is a need for alternatives to suspension and responses to negative incidents and behavior in the school environment are required for a safe and healthy learning environment (Novak, 2021; Pollock et al., 2023; Varela et al., 2021).

Discipline responses and consequences vary based on the experiences, guidelines, and expectations of teachers, administrators, school boards, and state departments of education (Rafa, 2019; Varela et al., 2021). Collecting and understanding the perceptions of administrators assigning disciplinary consequences is essential to establish expectations for behavior, safety in the educational environment, and approaches to school discipline (Novak, 2021; Pollock et al., 2023; Pope & Zuo, 2023; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). The impacts and influences on the decisions of high school administrators in urban schools to utilize alternatives to suspension are important to understand (Novak, 2022; Pope & Zuo, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to examine high school administrators' understanding of alternatives to suspension in Virginia urban public schools. Zero tolerance approaches to discipline have been determined not to be effective, and alternatives to suspension such as

restorative practices and counseling have shown positive results with lowering recidivism (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Martinez, 2009; Rafa, 2000). Research also noted the disproportionate impact of zero tolerance policies on students with disabilities and students who are Black and Hispanic (Huguley et al., 2022; Martinez, 2009; Nese et al., 2020; Skiba, 2000).

Objective and subjective factors impact each discipline incident and consequence. Each incident is impacted by the people involved, feelings of people involved, and responses to each incident by teachers, staff, and administrators (Hwang et al., 2022; Jabbari & Johnson, 2023; Rafa, 2019). There is research that provides quantitative data; therefore, additional qualitative research is needed to understand and comprehend the experiences urban high school administrators have when utilizing and assigning consequences for behavior, specifically alternatives to suspension.

Essential Research Question

How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension?

Supporting Sub-Questions

Three research questions to answer the essential research question were developed.

SQ1: How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilize alternatives to suspension?

SQ2: Which alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools perceive to be successful?

SQ3: What alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools use the most?

Significance of the Study

While there is research on the use of positive alternatives to suspension, additional qualitative studies are needed to explore school administrators' perception of alternatives to suspension. Research to assist in reducing the significant disproportionality of exclusionary discipline especially with Black students, Hispanic students, English Learners, and students with disabilities is needed. With the increase in alternatives to suspension since the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests over police brutality targeted towards Black and minority groups in 2020, it is important to study the perception of the high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilizing alternatives to suspension and the impact of suspensions.

The intent of this phenomenological research study was to explore the perceptions of the use of alternatives to suspension and the impact on exclusionary discipline in urban high schools in Virginia. Alternatives to suspension are the evidenced-based approaches of restorative practices, multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), social and emotional learning (SEL), school counseling and mental health services, culturally responsive practices, functional behavior assessments (FBA), behavior intervention plans (BIP), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Definition of Terms

Alternative education is defined as an instructional program for students who have a pending violation of a school board policy, been expelled or long-term suspended or have been released from a juvenile correctional center and been identified by the

superintendent of the Department of Correctional Education and the program's local

division superintendent to be in need of an alternative program (Virginia Department of

Education, 2023).

Exclusionary discipline is defined as a removal, out-of-school suspension (OSS), or

expulsion of a student from attendance for sufficient cause (VDOE, 2023).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or School-Wide Positive Behavior

Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is defined as a multi-tiered system of supports

(MTSS) application that focuses on maximizing social, emotional, and behavioral

outcomes while prioritizing equity, ensuring student outcomes, utilizing culturally

relevant practices, making data-based decisions, and sustaining an efficient system by

supporting staff implementation (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al.,

2023).

Restorative Practices (RP) is defined as an emerging social science that studies how to

strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections with

communities (I.I.R.P., n.d.).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which all young

people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge goals, feel, and show empathy for

others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring

decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020).

Urban schools are unique because of their size and density and experience challenges

associated with poverty, housing, and lack of educational resources (Yeh et al., 2022).

Urban schools are in populated areas, territories, or cities that must encompass at least

2,000 housing units or at 5,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Yeh et al., 2022).

Delimitations and Limitations

There were two limitations to this study. The sample size did achieve saturation; however, the sample was focused on urban high schools. The second limitation was the personal bias of the researcher. The researcher has professional experiences related to assigning discipline and providing guidance to other professionals that assign discipline that could impact the researcher's ability to be impartial.

There were two delimitations to this study. Elementary and middle school administrators or administrators working in rural or suburban schools were not included in the study. These administrators could have different and varied experiences and perceptions of discipline incidents, practices, and consequences. The second delimitation was not utilizing discipline data in the study. Discipline data would not assist or provide any context to the administrators' perceptions of alternatives to suspension.

Statement of Researcher Perspective

There may be personal bias with this researcher due to being employed by an urban public school division in Virginia. Bias was mitigated by examining the role of the researcher in recruitment of participants, data collection, and choice of location. The researcher did not use professional work email address or disclose job title to limit influence on responses and data collection.

Summary

This study is organized and presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to alternatives to suspension and administrator perception in urban school divisions in Virginia along with the statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study,

definition of the terms, and delimitations and limitations. Chapter 2 contains an overview of

relevant research related to alternatives to suspension, specifically the theoretical framework,

Social Learning Theory. Further, relevant research related to exclusionary discipline and other

areas that impact disciplinary consequences and responses are in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes

the methodology, including the research questions and research design, site selection, population

and sample, data collections strategies, data analysis strategies, and assessment of quality and

rigor. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study in relationship to the research questions.

Chapter 5 provides further context and implications for practice and future studies.

Chapter 2. Review of the Literature

In reviewing literature and policy guidelines, safety in the learning environment with consistent and equitable responses to behaviors were essential to creating and encouraging a safe learning environment (Huguley et al., 2022; Karami-Akkary et al., 2019; Lacoe & Steiberg, 2018; McIntosh et al., 2021). The main areas of focus for creating safe learning environment were restorative practices, multi-tiered system of supports, positive behavior interventions and supports, culturally relevant education, trauma informed practices, school counseling and mental health supports, functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans (Marting et al., 2022; Nese et al., 2020; United States Department of Education, 2021; Vincent et al., 2012; Virginia Board of Education, 2021).

Zero-Tolerance Policies and Practices

Zero-tolerance is defined as a highly structured disciplinary policy that promotes little to no flexibility in sanctions, typically out of school suspension or expulsion, for even minor school rule violations (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Henry et al., 2021; Kang-Brown et al., 2013). Zero-tolerance policies originated in the early 1990s to assist with drug enforcement in schools and focused on set consequences, typically severe and exclusionary, to an incident or behavior (Novak, 2021; Novak, 2022; Rafa, 2019; Skiba, 2000). In 1994, Congress passed the Gun Free Schools Act to further zero-tolerance policies in response to gun possession in schools and school violence (Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Valdebenito, 2019; Wang, 2019). This required schools to expel students who bring a firearm on campus without providing alternative education or access to curriculum or schools would lose funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Skiba, 2000; Valdebenito, 2019; Wang, 2022). The Gun Free Schools Act was the first time federal or state legislation required and mandated disciplinary action that

prior was solely determined by local school staff, local school boards, or superintendents (APA

Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Wang, 2022). The Gun Free

Schools Act was developed after the Crime Control Act of 1990 signed into law by President

George H.W. Bush to address the drug trade in the 1990s in the United States (Martinez, 2009;

Skiba, 2000; Wang, 2022). The Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 required schools to expel the

student for one year for the possession of a firearm on school property and refer the student to

the juvenile justice system which led to the increase in students being referred to juvenile justice

from schools (Anderson, 2020; APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gregory & Cornell,

2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2023; Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Martinez,

2009; Novak, 2021; Pope & Zuo, 2023).

In 1995, the Gun Free Schools Act expanded to include other weapons, not just firearms

(APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2023;

Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Martinez, 2009; Novak, 2021). By 1997, zero-tolerance policies began

to include additional behaviors and actions, such as: drugs, alcohol, and fighting in schools or on

school property (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Martinez,

2009). In 1999, schools began to include behaviors such as disrespect, truancy, cursing, verbal

threats, and inappropriate dress in zero-tolerance policies (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force,

2008; Johnson & Johnson, 2023; Lacoe & Steinberg; 2018; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Wang,

2022). The philosophy and policy of zero tolerance was to be implemented equitably and fairly

to all students as a deterrent to unsafe and inappropriate items and behaviors in schools;

however, zero-tolerance policies have provided severe consequences and resulted in students

being excluded from receiving an appropriate education for actions not aligned with the original

intent of the law (Anderson, 2020; APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gregory & Cornell,

2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2023; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Martinez, 2009; Novak, 2021; Pope & Zuo, 2023; Wang, 2022). In addition, United States Customs agency has moved away from zero-tolerance laws and policies after research indicated the policies were ineffective (Johnson & Johnson; 2023; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Wang, 2022).

The Gun Free Schools Act allowed for consequences for each individual situation and student to be addressed independently; however, research indicated most schools implemented policies and guidelines that are rigid and do not allow for individualized decision-making on consequences (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Wang, 2022). Zero-tolerance policies disproportionally impacted students of color, students with disabilities, students from a low socioeconomic status, and students who were achieving low academically (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Riddle & Sinclari, 2019; Valdebenito et al., 2019). In addition, research detailed suspensions and expulsions from school does not positively impact student behavior instead suspensions and expulsions were found to not change behavior and students returned to school with the same or more severe behavior (Learning Policy Institute, n.d.; Rodriquez & Welsh, 2022; Rosenbaum, 2022).

Research on zero-tolerance policies indicated that suspensions and expulsions were repeatedly assigned to the same students, decreased the graduation rate, diminished student academic achievement, and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system (Fabes et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2022; Johnson & Johnson, 2023; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). The inclusion of additional behaviors that fall under zero-tolerance have provided and required school administrators to suspend and expel students at a higher rate than prior to the Gun Free Schools Act (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000). The goals of zero-tolerance were to improve safety and provide clear and consistent consequences; however,

the impact on students was negative and caused a disproportionate increase in the suspensions and expulsions for students of color and students with disabilities (Fabes et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2022; Johnson & Johnson, 2023; Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018).

Suspension and expulsion are the tenets of zero-tolerance policies and practices (Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al. 2016; APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Bal et al., 2017; Johnson & Johnson, 2023). The lack of consistent, fair, and effective procedures to implement suspension and expulsion throughout school divisions and across the country raises questions and concerns about the use and implementation of zero-tolerance policies in schools (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Henry et al., 2021; Hwang et al., 2022; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). The use of zero-tolerance policies has increased since the inception of the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994 and has impacted students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds disproportionately which forces schools to review how zero-tolerance policies are being implemented (Fabes et al., 2021; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000). Suspension is the most used discipline response as it relates to zero-tolerance policies and is used more often in urban schools than in suburban or rural areas (Anderson, 2020; Cruz et al., 2021; Wu et al., 1982). In addition, research indicated disparities were found throughout the discipline process not just in the assignment of consequences (Cruz et al., 2021; Martinez, 2009; Novak, 2022).

Exclusionary Discipline

Exclusionary discipline is a consequence that removes a student from instruction, prevents students from receiving instruction and any related services, and excludes them from the education environment (Cruz et al., 2021; Novak, 2021; Novak, 2022; Peguero et al., 2021;

Pope & Zuo, 2023). Exclusionary discipline occurs regularly in schools; however, the positive impact of changed behavior by exclusionary discipline alone is not noted in the research (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Cruz et al., 2021; Fabes et al., 2021; Gregory & Cornell, 2009). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) identified that an effective way to change behavior is to identify the reason or reasons behind the disciplinary infraction. By identifying the reason or reasons, school staff and families can respond and intervene to improve, repair, and mediate the reasons (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Cruz et al., 2021; Fabes et al., 2021; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Jabbari & Johnson, 2020). Research further indicated consistent and fair consequences, including out of school suspensions and other exclusionary discipline, have a positive impact on student behaviors and can reduce out of school suspensions (Anyon et al., 2016; Blake et al., 2020; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Liu et al., 2022; Morgan, 2021). In addition, researchers identified the importance of students' feelings of fairness of teachers, administrators, and other adults in schools when disciplining students; however, extreme and perceived unfair exclusionary discipline were found to have negative consequences on students and overall school climate (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Morgan, 2021; Novak, 2022).

Other exclusionary discipline consequences included office referrals, timeout, in-school suspensions, and removals from the educational environment (Jabbari & Johnson, 2023; Martinez, 2009; Perrodin, 2022; Rosenbaum, 2022; Valdebenito, 2019; Welsh, 2022). Negative outcomes for each of these consequences include a loss of instructional time, diminished academic progress, and increased truancy and dropout rate for the student impacted (Perry & Morris, 2014; Valdebenito, 2019; Welsh, 2022). Higher suspension and expulsion rates in school were determined to have a negative impact on academic performance in the school and school

climate (Cruz et al., 2021; Fabes et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2011; Jabbari & Johnson, 2020).

School climate, student achievement, student enrollment, diversity of the student body, teacher

perspectives toward discipline, and teacher classroom management skills impact the level of

exclusionary discipline in schools and discipline disparities (Anyon et al., 2014; Hwang et al.,

2022; Morgan, 2021; Skiba, 2000; Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba et al., 2014).

Disparate Discipline

Disparate discipline has a significant impact on students of color, students of low

socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities (Bal et al., 20179; Blake et al., 2020;

Camacho & Krezmein, 2019; Cruz et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2014). Researchers note

numerous impacts on special populations of students which include higher dropout rates, higher

arrest rates, and increased involvement with the juvenile justice system (Bal et al., 2017; Hwang

et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Novak, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2014). Identifying and understanding

students that are included in one or more of these areas was essential for researchers to

disaggregate the discipline data and likelihood of a student being suspended (Barnes & Motz,

2018; Liu et al., 2022; Novak, 2021; Novak, 2022; Pope & Zuo, 2023). Male students of color

with disabilities are suspended double the rate of white male students with disabilities and triple

the rate of white female students with disabilities (Bal et al., 2017; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Losen,

2018; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Rafa, 2019; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Schools located in more urban areas are more likely to adopt zero-tolerance policies

which leads to increased consequences for students of color, students living in low

socioeconomic status, and students experiencing homelessness (APA Zero Tolerance Task

Force, 2008; Blake et al., 2020; Rafa, 2019; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019; Welsh, 2022).

Exclusionary discipline is used at significant higher levels on Black students versus their white

peers (Blake et al., 2020; Camacho & Krezmien, 2018; Cruz et al., 2021; Stewart & Ezell, 2022). Black students were suspended 23 percent higher to their proportion of the total student population according to the United States Government Accountability Office (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). There is a greater use of exclusionary discipline on Black students and typically more police within urban school divisions compared to those that are predominately white (Camacho & Krezmien, 2018; Gadsden, 2017; Novak, 2022; Pop & Zuo, 2023). In addition to higher suspension rates, there is a disproportionately higher rate of incarceration of Black students after being excluded from school (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Novak, 2022; Novak, 2021).

The population of students in public schools is becoming increasingly diverse, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau by the year 2050 more than 50% of the population will be individuals who have historically been considered in the minority, American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Students from different racial and linguistic groups experience significantly disparate discipline consequences to their peers who are White, and English is their first language. The highest percentage of students receiving suspensions and other exclusionary discipline was Black students. Black students, Asian and Pacific Islander students, and Hispanic students are found eligible as students with disabilities at a higher rate than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The high school dropout rate is also disproportionately higher for students who are in different racial and cultural groups. The highest dropout rate according to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics was for Hispanic students compared to white students without disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; Virginia Department of Education, 2023).

Section 504 and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Section 504 of Title II allows for the development of 504 Plans for students with disabilities to provide modifications, accommodations, and services to participate in and benefit from school programs at the same level as peers without disabilities (Lewis & Muniz, 2023; Virginia Department of Education, 2023). The other federal law that complements Section 504 is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). IDEA details how school staff are to provide services, accommodations, and specially designed instruction through an Individual Education Program (IEP) (Virginia Department of Education, 2023). An IEP is further defined as an individualized and personalized program developed for a student with an identified disability to provide specially designed instruction, supports, services, and accommodations reasonably calculated to provide academic and functional benefit (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). These two federal laws are fundamentally different, but both provide protections for students with disabilities. IDEA is an entitlement law, and Section 504 is an anti-discrimination law (Lewis & Muniz, 2023).

Discipline of students with disabilities under Section 504 and the IDEA has restrictions and specific alternatives to suspension (Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lewis & Muniz, 2023). The IDEA details the requirements of functional behavior assessments, manifestation review determination, and interim alternative educational placements (Curran & Finch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021; Office of Special Education Programs, 1997). Interim alternative educational settings include public separate schools, private day schools, homebound, and homebased placements which would be removal from the general education environment with non-disabled peers (Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). A free

appropriate public education (FAPE) must be made available to students in alternative placements through their Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). Federal and state regulations provide IEP teams with guidance on requirement after a discipline incident and further provides parents, IEP teams, and administrators on FAPE obligations after a discipline incident (Curran & Pinch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021, Office of Special Education Programs, 1997). Specialized interventions and placements opportunities for students with disabilities give school staff additional time and educational opportunities to provide social skill instruction, build replacement strategies, and intervene in decision-making for students with disabilities (Curran & Finch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021).

Implementing behavioral and discipline interventions for students with disabilities is expected and required as outlined in the IDEA (Curran & Pinch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). IEP teams use data to drive decisions about interventions, supports, services, accommodations, and placement settings for students with disabilities to determine a free appropriate public education when student exhibit behaviors in the educational environment that interferes with the student's learning or the learning of other students (Cruz et al., 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). School staff have an obligation to address behavioral concerns in a student's IEP when a student exhibits difficulties with behaviors, interactions with peers or adults, and social skills in the educational environment (Cruz et al., 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). Also, staff should know and understand functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans to provide students with a free appropriate public education (Curran & Finch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). These strategies, services, and interventions have been found to decrease the suspensions

and alternative placements students with disabilities receive due to disciplinary incidents (Cruz et al., 2021; Curran & Pinch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021, Office of Special Education Programs, 1997).

There are expectations and requirements for students with disabilities to receive an appropriate program, services, and accommodations is the main responsibility of the student's IEP team and school, even if there has been a significant discipline incident (Cruz et al., 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021). Specialized programming and interim alternative settings create a challenge for school divisions. The manifestation determination review decision may lead to a change of placement for a student to an interim alternative placement, homebound, homebased, or other more restrictive placement options (Cruz et al., 2021; Curran & Pinch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021, Office of Special Education Programs, 1997). In addition, the manifestation determination review could require a functional behavior assessment and behavior intervention plan to be developed for a student (Cruz et al., 2021; Curran & Pinch, 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021, Office of Special Education Programs, 1997). Alternative placements and additional services for students with disabilities are required to be reviewed for students with disabilities after consequences of a discipline incident or incidents are greater than 10 days or there is a pattern of removals greater than 10 days (Cruz et al., 2021; Katsiyannis & Smith, 2003; Lee et al., 2021).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a framework many schools use to give targeted support to students (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). The targeted supports are evidenced-based and provided to students to support their academic, social, emotional, or behavioral needs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Lustick, 2021;

McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). The resources and supports are structured in a prevention-based three-tiered framework to increase the academic and behavioral outcomes for students (Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Utilizing MTSS allows practices to be strength-based and organized into tiers, typically three, Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 1 is core supports and programming focused on meeting the needs of approximately 80% of students (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 2 includes supplemental and standardized academic, emotional, social, or behavioral interventions provided to small groups of students identified as at-risk and typically serves approximately 15% of students (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 3 serves approximately 5% of students, includes intensive intervention for students that are individualized based on student need, and is provided to students not responding to Tier 2 (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021).

MTSS practices associated with alternatives to suspension focus on social, emotional, and behavioral supports (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 1 practices are large classroom lessons and instruction that students are engaged in that helps to build community along with setting norms and agreements in the classroom (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). Tier 2 practices consist of restorative circles, student success planning, peer mediations, Check In Check Out, structured conversations that provide a space to resolve minor interpersonal conflicts, and other conflict resolution processes that are focused on building skills and further developing schoolwide procedures (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 3 practices are re-entry circles, data-based individualization,

and other intensive interventions to support students with severe and persistent academic, social, emotional, and/or behavioral needs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). MTSS provides an environment and structure for new initiatives to be introduced and integrated through an equity-based lens across the school in areas such as social emotional learning; college and career readiness; and diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

The MTSS framework was developed and influenced by special education, curriculum-based measurement and precision teaching, teacher consultation, evidence-based practices, behavioral sciences, innovation implementation research, and other applications (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023). MTSS can be developed to incorporate restorative practices, PBIS, responses to student behavior, attendance, and school culture by outlining three levels of academic and behavioral interventions (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). For example, within the MTSS framework, restorative practices or other academic and behavioral interventions would be broken down into strategies aimed to prevent, reduce, and respond to academic and behavioral issues in the educational environment (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). The strategies would be implemented and used with students across the three tiers to provide evidenced-based, tier-specific practices and set expectations for responses to student needs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). The expected tiered responses to academic and behavioral needs of students should be developed with input from staff and students while using discipline policies and procedures to outline the interventions focused on prevention, intervention, and restoration instead of exclusionary and punitive (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021).

MTSS is used as the overarching prevention-based framework for PBIS, Response to Intervention (RTI), and other three-tiered systems designed to prevent, intervene, and respond to needs of students across schools and school divisions (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). The American School Counseling Association, the U.S. Department of Education, Virginia Department of Education, and other professional organizations recommend the use of MTSS, PBIS, and RTI (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires the use of RTI through federal regulations, and MTSS uses procedures and processes such as team-based planning, long-term and short-term objectives and goals, and student progress and responsiveness derived from special education (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021). Multidisciplinary teams use MTSS to develop and improve the continuum of evidence-based practices provided to students so they can achieve academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hollands et al., 2022; Lustick, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Alternatives to Suspension

Research on alternatives to suspension has increased since the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) was passed and mandated a reduction in disproportionate suspension practices and zero tolerance practices that were developed in response to the Gun-Free School Act (1994) (Lustik, 2021; Lustik, 2022; Pope & Zuo, 2022). There are numerous alternatives to suspension, and the research was consistent in describing the need to respond and work with students to understand the reasoning for their behaviors while providing support and teaching behavioral expectations (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Hwang et al., 2022; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Nese et al., 2020). Proper training for implementing alternatives to suspension, skill

building, practice to respond to behaviors in the school environment, and ensuring parents, teachers, and school staff are involved is important and allows for easier implementation (Augustine et al., 2018; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Henry et al., 2021).

Inequities in consequences and the increase of exclusionary discipline along with law enforcement referrals provided educators, school boards, and lawmakers with reasons to focus on alternatives to suspension (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Hwang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Perrodin, 2022). Threat assessment processes and policies have been enacted across many states, and in Virginia, the threat assessment process has been amended and increased over the past fifteen years (Maeng et al., 2019; Perrodin, 2022). Nationally, Black male students make up approximately 15 percent of the student population; however, as many as 39.3 percent of Black male students received out of school suspensions according to the United States Department of Education (2019). Based on the same data from the Civil Rights Data Collection, 23 percent of Black males were expelled, and 31 percent received a referral to law enforcement (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). There is a direct connection to zero-tolerance policies and the disproportionate impact on students of color (APA Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

In June 2021, the Virginia Board of Education developed the *Model Guidance for Positive and Preventive Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension* as the latest revision of the requirement from the 1993 Virginia General Assembly to develop Student Conduct Policy Guidelines (VDOE, 2023). This guidance impacts how school division staff reports disciplinary incidents. Additionally, in the model guidance, there is a requirement to assign and report an intervention to each discipline incident that occurs (VDOE, 2023).

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices include nonpunitive alternatives to zero-tolerance policies that emphasizes repairing harm instead of punishing behavior and in turn lower suspension, expulsion, and removal rates (Anfinson et al., 2010; Craig & Martin, 2019; Lustick, 2021; Skiba et al., 2014). The terms restorative justice, restorative practices, and restorative discipline were each used throughout research (Anfinson et al., 2010; Craig & Martin, 2019; Fronius et al., 2019; Lustick, 2021; Skiba et al., 2014). The terms restorative justice, restorative practices, and restorative discipline indicated practices in general and referred to any practice, procedures, or activity a school uses to build community or repair harm to the community (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Anyon et al., 2016; Craig & Martin, 2019; Fronius et al., 2019). Restorative justice, restorative practices, and restorative discipline are connected to restorative theory which is a philosophy of conflict resolution used in indigenous cultures and introduced to Western criminal justice practices (I.I.R.P., n.d.). Restorative practices included compassion and rehabilitation for all parties involved and the goal is to address the needs of the most impacted (Armour, 2016; Fronius et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2018; Lustick, 2021; Morrison, 2003). Restorative practices are to be used intentionally to build relationships within the school environment; however, there is not a large amount of data on the use of restorative practices and their impact on discipline consequences. There was data to indicate restorative practices are used more with Black and Latinx students than white students (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2018; Gregory & Evans, 2020; Hollands et al., 2022; Lodi et al., 2021; Payne & Welch, 2013; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stewart & Ezell, 2022).

Research found that suspensions for white students decreased when restorative practices were used and Black students were less likely to be suspended, but more likely to receive

restorative discipline (Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Vincent et al., 2011). Restorative practices were more effective on reducing the discipline gap between racial groups when the issue was discussed and confronted by staff and administrators (Gregory et al., 2015; Lustick, 2021; Stevenson, 2015). Restorative practices were more effective in addressing behavior, conflict, and inequality when administrators also utilized the practices to address racism (Gregory et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2022; Lodi et al., 2022; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stewart & Ezell, 2022). This practice was called critical restorative justice which combines reflections on student behavior, impacts on the classroom community, and effects on the larger system where they are a member (Hollands et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023; Hughes, 2022; Lustick, 2021). Researchers described the need for a model of culturally responsive restorative practices to heal interpersonal harms and provide space for adult and staff change (Lustick, 2021; Lustick, 2022; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Weaver & Swank, 2020).

The focus of restorative practices was to build relational, interconnected, and interdependent school cultures, not compliance with behaviors and classroom management (Gregory et al., 2022; Huguley et al., 2022; Lustick, 2022; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Vaandering, 2014). Other researchers confirmed this finding noting that in schools, especially high schools, there was a strong need for control by administrators and teachers, and researchers recommended using restorative practices in their decision-making prior to implementing the practices with students (Cavanaugh, 2014; Lustick, 2021; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Zachariah, 2004). By combining three priorities, student engagement, resilience, and restorative practices, Knight and Wadhwa (2014) defined critical restorative justice. Resilience is defined as fostering opportunities to build relationships,

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providing equal opportunity to participate in activities, nurturing critical mindedness of social inequities, and providing opportunities to practice cultural flexibility (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Knight & Wadhwa, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018; Mirsky et al., 2007). Critical restorative justice also provided students and school communities with the chance to practice community-building and relationship building (Hughes et al., 2022; Lodi et al., 2022; Lustick, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018; Mirsky, 2007; Morrison, 2003).

Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP)

Behavior analysis allows educators to identify, develop, implement, and support positive and restorative interventions for students exhibiting unsafe behaviors in the school environment (Henry et al., 2021; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Behavior analysis could be used in schools to investigate and explain disparate exclusionary discipline and assist in developing, implementing, and supporting positive and restorative services and interventions (Henry et al., 2021). FBAs and BIPs are developed and implemented utilizing behavior analysis (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Behavior analysis describes zero-tolerance policies as punishment procedures that do not produce long-lasting effects on socially appropriate behaviors (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). FBAs and BIPs identify, determine, and teach new skills and build relationships as a proactive, culturally appropriate approach to school behavior issues (Henry et al., 2021). Behavior analysis identified the need for teaching social-emotional skills, improving classroom management, and involving parents and school staff (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). When developing an individualized behavior intervention plan, early screening for mental health needs, improved collection on behaviors, and increased collaboration between educators, juvenile justice professionals, and community partners is necessary (Henry et al., 2021; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Behavior analysis provides a framework for understanding different cultures and cultural miscommunication (Henry et al., 2021; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Behavior analysis considers that behavioral exchanges between people, for example between a teacher and a student, may provide the antecedent for the behavior of another person (Henry et al., 2021; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Recognizing that the behavior changes or affects the context for another person's behavior is an important aspect of behavior analysis from the perspective of cultural exchanges (Henry et al., 2021; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). This provides context and a framework for understanding how cultural miscommunication or misunderstanding might influence behavior and how it can be used to inform responses and to analyze behaviors (Henry et al., 2021; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social emotional learning (SEL) is an educational approach that promotes the development of social and emotional skills in students and adults (Gimbert et al., 2021; Learning Policy Institute, n.d.; Nese et al., 2020; Williams & Jagers, 2020). The definition of social emotional learning from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the:

> Process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020, Fundamentals of SEL section, para. 1).

Research provided evidence-based practices for SEL focused on the following areas: explicit instruction, curriculum integration, positive and supportive classroom climate, collaborative

learning, emotion regulation and mindfulness, social and emotional skill development for teachers and staff, family and community engagement, and universal screening (Atwell et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2015; Dusenbury et al., 2015; Gimbert et al., 2021; Nese et al., 2020). SEL practices and interventions vary based on the age of students, are culturally relevant, are adapted based on the school or division, and are flexible (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Caspe et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2022).

Direct instruction on SEL is provided by school counselors, teachers, and other staff on social and emotional skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020; Gimbert et al., 2021; Williams & Jagers, 2020). A comprehensive school counseling program would provide this explicit instruction, though it is mainly provided at the elementary and middle school level by school counselors or classroom teachers with a focus on good adjustment outcomes (Durlak et al., 2015; Dusenbury et al., 2015; Learning Policy Institute, n.d.). Elementary, middle, and high school classroom teachers can assist with explicit instruction throughout the school day in a variety of subjects (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Nese et al., 2020). Research indicated the importance of school-wide instruction and cultivating SEL among professional educators (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Graff & Carstatphen, 2018; Huguley et al., 2022; Williams & Jagers, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, inequitable teaching and learning occurred and was heightened in urban school divisions (Gimbert et al., 2021; Huguley et al., 2022). SEL interventions were found to have a positive impact on student behavior, help to develop psychologically healthy and productive students, and build positive SEL knowledge and behavioral skills (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Durlak et al., 2015; Gimbert et al., 2021; Graff & Carstarphen, 2018; Jennings et al., 2017).

Intentional incorporation of SEL skills and practices integrated into the daily classroom curriculum for all students was determined effective by researchers (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; CASEL, 2020; Gimbert et al., 2021; Huguley et al., 2022; Jenning & Greenberg, 2009). Teaching SEL skills will nurture healthy and emotionally productive students to link skills that increase attendance, reduce bullying, decrease suspensions, and lower the number of referrals to administrators (National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019; Gimbert et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2017). Integrating SEL concepts, skills, activities, and supports into the general education curriculum instead of teaching SEL lessons and curriculum in separate courses can assist students in applying SEL skills across the curriculum, in real-life contexts, and improves overall development (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Caspe et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2022). Consistent implementation and instruction of SEL skills and practices across grade levels and subject areas provided students and adults with educational, functional, and cross-curricular practice of SEL skills (Belfield et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2015; Dusenbury et al., 2015; Nese et al., 2020).

School administrators and leaders needed to provide professional learning to teachers and staff to build and increase SEL skill development by purposefully offering intentional practices and principles to build capacity (Brown et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones et al., 2013; Williams & Jagers, 2020). The five core competencies from CASEL (2019) are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The core competencies guide the establishment of classroom norms that build and maintain a safe, respectful, and inclusive classroom environment where all students feel valued and supported and SEL skills become a school and classroom focus, relationships improved, classroom management struggles decreased, instruction increased, and

teacher burnout decreased (CASEL, 2019; Durlak et al., 2017; Gimbert et al., 2021; Huguley et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Nese et al., 2020; Williams & Jagers, 2020). Teachers and staff utilized strategies and practices such as clear and consistent expectations, creating and maintaining positive relationships, and fostering a sense of belonging to increase and improve the use and understanding of SEL skills by all students (Brown et al., 2007; Dusenbury et al., 2015; Huguley et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2017; Nese et al., 2020; USDOE, 2021; Williams & Jagers, 2020). A positive and supportive climate was noted as having a direct and positive impact on negative behaviors in the school environment (Belfield et al., 2015; Durlak et al., 2015; Learning Policy Institute, n.d.; Nese et al., 2020).

Historically, character education, bullying prevention, and drug prevention programs were separate curriculums that were implemented in separate courses by school counselors or health teachers (Bergman, 2004; CASEL, 2019; Levine et al., 1985; Rabin & Smith, 2013). CASEL worked for almost twenty years to incorporate SEL skills and curriculum into the general educational curriculum to increase and improve student success which can be taught by any teacher and engrained in any course (Bergman, 2004; CASEL, 2019; Levine et al., 1985; Rabin & Smith, 2013). CASEL provides high quality, evidence-based curriculum and programming based on its framework and resources to implement SEL across curriculum and subject areas (CASEL, 2019). CASEL acknowledged the diversity, culture, and experiential trauma gap within their framework and is working strategically to improve their focus on equity, race, and trauma (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Jagers et al., 2018; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Through the updated framework, CASEL (2019) was able to expand the benefits of SEL and the impacts on academics, behavior, and contributions to our society and economy (Belfield

et al., 2015; CASEL, 2019; Durlak et al., 2017; Dusenbury et al., 2015; Jennings & Frank, 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Muniz, 2020).

School Counseling and Mental Health Supports

School counseling is defined as school counselors meeting students' academic, career, and social/emotional needs through a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) developed a framework to guide the work of school counselors (ASCA, 2019). Fostering relationships by gaining trust and building rapport through active listening while increasing communication promotes school counselors as leaders in the school environment (Borders & Shoffner, 2013; Goodman-Scott, 2023; Janson et al., 2009; Tubin & Pinyan-Weiss, 2015). Building relationship and advocacy skills for a comprehensive school counseling program helped the overall structure of the school and provided structure for students to receive SEL skills and support for staff to incorporate SEL in the curriculum (ASCA, 2019; Eyllon et al., 2022; Maeng et al., 2020; Stinson et al., 2021). Relationship building and ethical decision-making with students and staff in the school environment impacts all stakeholders and students (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023). Mental health supports and services, increasing since the Covid-19 pandemic, are needed by students for a wide range of societal, personal, social, academic, and school-based stressors (Eyllon et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Stinson et al., 2021). School counseling and mental health support work with students and their families to assist in building coping skills, to respond to crises, to feel safe at school, and to develop skills for healthy development (ASCA, 2020; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023).

Students living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, exhibiting difficult behaviors, and not achieving academically need more intensive or Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and interventions

from school counselors or other mental health providers available in public schools (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Janson et al., 2009). School counselors utilize the CASEL SEL practices in their daily work and understand through their counselor education programs how biases impact the counseling relationship and their professional identity (ASCA, 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Stinson et al., 2021). In addition, school counselors are trained and educated on diverse cultures and explore their own implicit and explicit biases (ASCA, 2016; ASCA, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2023). Through classroom lessons and consultation with teachers and administrators, school counselors can provide the support for universal practices, small group, and individual counseling or Tier 1, 2, and 3 through a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) model (Gimbert et al., 2023; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott, 2023; Stinson et al., 2021).

Comprehensive school counseling programs utilizes the MTSS frameworks to frame their work through the interconnectedness of the academic, behavior, and social/emotional needs of students and addressing the whole child (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). School counselors and mental health staff members work in teams with other staff members to provide specialized educational support for students with academic and behavioral needs for all students. Differentiating supports and services for students exhibiting difficulty in the educational setting are delivered by school counselors aligned with the ASCA Standards and can include prevention logic in a three-tiered system to include small group skills practice, peer mentoring, behavioral contracting, social skills club, cognitive behavior therapy, adult-student lunch-bunch, classroom lessons, and individual solution-focused counseling (ASCA, 2018; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). School

counselors are educated, trained, and prepared to work with the whole child to impact the student's academic, social, emotional, and behavior success through prevention, education, and support (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023). Evidenced-based practices, consultation, and collaboration with school are implemented by school counselors to collect data and to analyze that data to guide decision-making to positively impact students and the school community (ASCA, 2018; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2013).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is an evidence-based multi-tiered system of supports for implementing prevention and intervention practices in schools to reduce disruptive behaviors (Bal, 2018; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Tier 1 is prevention and intervention practices delivered to students at the universal level, Tier 2 is provided to students nonresponsive to universal prevention, and Tier 3 is provided to students with intensive problem behaviors (Center on PBIS, 2020). SWPBIS is designed with a continuum of prevention and intervention practices, supports, and services to address problem behavior with the goal of starting in the least restrictive environment (Bal, 2018; Gage et al., 2022; Heidelburg et al., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2021). Positive instructional approaches may require additional time for staff to be trained in implementing tiered services and supports with fidelity prior to implementation (Bal, 2018; Center on PBIS, 2020; Rosario et al., 2021; Sugai et al., 2012). Staff receiving professional learning in explicit alternatives to suspension and SWPBIS was found to reduce out of school suspensions and increase the benefit from SWPBIS (Center on PBIS, 2020; Gage et al., 2022; Rosario et al., 2021).

SWPBIS follows a public health approach in which two levels of targeted and indicated programs are implemented to build on universal strategies and practices and has been widely encouraged and even mandated by some state departments (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Heidelberg et el., 2021; Horner et al., 2005). SWPBIS also utilized behavioral, social learning, and organizational behavioral principles traditionally used with individual students and applied those principles to be generalized across an entire school when implemented consistently (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Center on PBIS, 2020; Gage et al., 2022; Heidelberg et al., 2021). SWPBIS has a structured implementation plan that school staff can follow to guide the work within their buildings and is an MTSS application that focuses on increasing and improving social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes and supports for all students (Center on PBIS, 2023; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Heidelberg et al., 2021). The implementation plan details how to develop school-wide positive behavior expectations, school-wide positive behavior rewards, consequences and responses to negative behaviors, and lesson planning for instruction on school-wide positive behavior expectations, rewards, and consequences (Center on PBIS, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Heidelberg et al., 2021; Sugai et al., 2011).

Culturally Responsive Education

Focusing on cultural diversity in the classroom and how teachers can effectively manage students from different backgrounds and cultures was found to have an impact on student behavior, classroom management, and discipline consequences (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Siwatu et al., 2017). Culturally responsive classroom management was developed to provide a framework for teachers to effectively manage diverse classrooms by acknowledging and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds (Weinstein et al., 2004;

Williams et al., 2022). A sense of community and mutual respect is developed within classrooms by recognizing and valuing cultural diversity, fostering positive student-teacher relationships, understanding and appreciating students' cultural backgrounds, and adapting instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of students (Gaias et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Milner, 2019; Williams et al., 2021). Culturally responsive classroom management strategies that include the background and experiences of students in an inclusive and engaging learning environment that supports the academic and personal growth of all students limits misunderstandings, conflict, and disengagement (Gaias et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2022).

To assist with creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment, administrators and school boards need to develop policies that are culturally responsive and assist with creating that environment (Gaias et al., 2019; Knight & Wadhwa, 2014; Williams et al., 2022). Analyzing policy to identify potential gaps in policies on culturally responsive classroom management, equitable disciplinary practices, and improved educational outcomes for all students is an essential component of culturally responsive education (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Williams et al., 2022). Siwatu et al. (2017) developed and validated the Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Self-Efficacy Scale to measure teachers' beliefs and confidence in their ability to implement and grow culturally responsive practices in classroom management. The study focused on addressing cultural diversity in the classroom and how teachers can effectively manage and engage students from different backgrounds while promoting positive behavior and an inclusive classroom environment (Gaias et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020; Milner, 2019; Swiatu et al., 2017). Culturally responsive discipline practices focused on understanding student behaviors within the context of their cultural backgrounds (Gaias et al.,

2019; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Milner, 2019). Ongoing professional learning for educators and collaborating with families and community members to support and increase the cultural competence and understanding of diverse cultures is essential to implement culturally responsive classroom management and culturally responsive discipline practices (Huguley et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020; Milner, 2019; Swaitu et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022).

Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP)

Trauma-informed practices (TIP) were developed in response to increased prevalence and implications of childhood trauma based on the results from the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Berkovich & Grinshtain, 2022; Felitti et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). ACEs have been linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use problems in adolescence and adulthood significant risk for poor health and mental health outcomes (CDC, n.d.; Felitti et al., 2019; Loomis et al., 2023; McGruder, 2019). ACEs may also negatively impact education, job opportunities, and earning potential; however, ACEs can be prevented through protective factors like a positive relationship with a trusted adult (CDC, n.d.; Loomis et al., 2023; McGruder, 2019; Pierce et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). Examples of ACEs are being a victim of violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; having a family member attempt or die by suicide; growing up in a household with substance abuse problems, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison (Berliner & Kolko, 2016; McGruder, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). Women and several racial and ethnic minority groups were at risk for experiencing four or more types of ACEs (Berliner & Kolko,

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2016; Felitti et al., 2019; Loomis et al., 2023; McGruder, 2019; Pierce et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019).

ACEs and other traumatic experiences like living in under-resourced or racially segregated neighborhoods, frequently moving, and experiencing food insecurity may cause toxic stress (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin, 1999; Tarver et al., 2022; Wheaton, 2009). Students that have experienced toxic stress may have difficulty forming appropriate relationships and affecting the student's attention, decision-making, and learning (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin, 1999; Wheaton, 2009). Also, toxic stress may negatively impact a student's brain development, immune system, and stress-response systems (Berliner & Kolko, 2016; Loomis et al., 2023; Marting et al., 2022; McGruder, 2019; Tarver et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2019). School staff must acknowledge and address early childhood trauma and its impact on students' learning by adopting trauma-informed practices which will give educators the skills to create and sustain a supportive educational environment that facilitates the well-being and academic success of all students (Anderson, 2019; Marting et al., 2022; McGruder, 2019; Morgan et al., 2014; Pearlin, 1999; Pierce et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019).

Alternative Educational Programs

Assigning students to an alternative educational program after a discipline incident is a severe form of exclusionary discipline (Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2018; Quin, 2019; Welsh, 2022). Alternative educational programs are separate facilities that could be operated by a school system or by a private education company (Skiba, 2000; Skiba, 2001; Welsh, 2022). Alternative educational programs or schools are used for addressing students with suspensions or expulsions or students who exhibit disruptive behaviors in general education schools (Gregory et al., 2018; Quin, 2019; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Black and Latinx students, male students,

students with disabilities, and homeless students receive the harshest consequences, at a disproportionate rate, compared to their white, non-disabled peers (Anyon et al., 2014; Craig & Martin, 2019; Gregory et al., 2018; Gonzalez, 2012). Serious and violent discipline incidents like physical assaults and weapons-related incidents are typically connected with assignments to alternative education programs (Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014).

Alternative educational programs and schools are exclusionary by removing students from the same educational, social, and extracurricular opportunities as their peers (Gonzalez, 2012; Perrodin, 2022; Rosenbaum, 2022; Valdebenito et al., 2019;). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) determined the negative impacts or out of school suspension or expulsion and framed the purpose of alternative educational programs to continue to educate and provide students with additional resources to provide counseling and restorative practices (Anderson, 2019; Gregory et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2022). Typically, there is a heightened police or security presence in the alternative educational programs or schools (Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Craig & Martin, 2019; Gonzalez, 2012). This could lead students, specifically Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and students in a low socioeconomic status, placed in alternative programs exposed to the juvenile justice system at a higher rate than their white typically developing peers (Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Craig & Martin, 2019; Gonzalez, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

There are numerous theoretical frameworks utilized to understand, explain, and detail interpersonal relationships, human behavior, behavioral interactions, and how students learn (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Vrieling et al., 2019; Wheeler & Richey, 2019). Consequences in response to negative student behavior to improve and teaching appropriate behavior is needed for

positive student growth and improving student success (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Vrieling et al., 2019; Wheeler & Richey, 2019). Direct and explicit teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behaviors has a positive impact on improving student behavior which will lead to long-term changes (Bandura, 1977; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Vrieling et al., 2019).

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura and published in 1977. The theory is rooted in Pavlov's classical conditioning and Skinner's operant conditioning theories. Bandura believed that direct reinforcement cannot account for all types of learning; however, children and adults often learn things without ever having had direct experience with it and without demonstrating their new behaviors (Bandura, 1977). The two main ideas of Social Learning Theory are that behavior is learned from the environment through observational learning and there are mental factors that determine whether or not a new behavior is acquired (Bandura, 1977). By combining cognitive and behavioral components of other theories, the social learning theory provides the basis for a total understanding of behavior and how students learn appropriate behavior (Vrieling et al., 2019; Wheeler & Richey, 2019).

There are four elements of social learning theory. The first element is attention which is where a student experiences a lesson with the specific behavior to practice and repeat (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019). The lesson in the first element must engage a student sufficiently to hold their attention (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019). The second element is retention which is how students remember what they have seen or heard while internalizing and practicing the behavior to be replicated (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019). The third element, motor reproduction, describes how students should be given time to practice the observed and practiced behavior from the first and second

elements (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019). The fourth element, motivation, is how students must be able to see the benefit through direct reinforcement, vicarious reinforcement, and self-reinforcement for the new behavior to have long-term impacts and changes (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019).

Bandura described the difference between observational learning and enactive learning (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019). For observational learning, students learn by actively observing others, and enactive learning by doing then experiencing positive or negative consequences of their action (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019). Students interpret the consequences to assist and influence their future actions, build motivations and habits, and shape beliefs for future behaviors (Nickerson, 2022). Bandura details the social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development of students by regulating their behaviors and determining the motivation for their behavior (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022). Other people, both adults and peers, serve as models to students to believe, teach and model thinking, believe, expect, anticipate, self-regulate, develop comparisons, and make judgments (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019).

Summary

Chapter 2 contains an overview of relevant research related to alternatives to suspension and disciplinary processes in public schools such as zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline, restorative practices, multi-tiered system of supports, and social emotional learning. Other alternatives to suspension are culturally relevant education, trauma-informed practices, functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans, and school counseling and mental health supports. Positive behavior interventions and supports, professional learning on effective discipline, and program-based and policy-based interventions are also described in

Chapter 2 with an emphasis on social learning theory and other program-based and policy-based interventions. Chapter 3 describes the methodology. Chapter 4 presented the findings of this study in relation to the research questions and emergent themes. Chapter 5 describes the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of this study.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Introduction

This was a qualitative study to examine high school administrators' understanding of alternatives to suspension in Virginia urban public schools. This qualitative study included one on one semi-structured interviews via Zoom with high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools. The interviews examined how high school administrators understand, use, and prefer alternatives to suspension. Administrators' perception of themselves as emotionally intelligent, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed practitioners were also explored and analyzed.

Essential Research Question

How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension?

Supporting Sub-Questions

Three research questions to answer the essential research question were developed.

SQ1: How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilize alternatives to suspension?

SQ2: Which alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools perceive to be successful?

SQ3: What alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools use the most?

Qualitative Research Design

This research study was a phenomenological study focused on deepening the understanding of Virginia urban high school administrator use of alternatives to suspension and why administrators utilize certain alternatives to suspension over others. Administrator perception and experience with different alternatives to suspension was also explored. Phenomenological research was designed to describe the "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). This phenomenological research study focused on collecting data from participants on the use of alternatives to suspension to grasp the nature of the concept or lived experience of the urban high school administrators in Virginia (van Manen, 2016).

Phenomenological research was developed based on the writings of a German mathematician Edmund Husserl with research added by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty is popular in social and health sciences, especially sociology, psychology, nursing and the health sciences, and education (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Phenomenological research acknowledges how "lived experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.76). The purpose and goal of phenomenological research is on a single concept or idea that a heterogenous group of individuals have experienced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). A key component to phenomenology is interviewing participants followed by analyzing data from the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The data analysis uses systematic processes and procedures to determine narrow categories and concepts from broad ideas and statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy

& Ormrod, 2019). The data analysis process would then detail descriptions to explain the what and how of the shared experience of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Data were gathered through interviews and analyzed for common themes, threads, and tensions. The data went through horizonalization, which is analyzing the data and highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes to provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher then developed clusters of meaning from the significant statements into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell Baez, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Textural and structural descriptions were then developed from the significant statements and themes to write and develop a description of the participants' experiences with using alternatives to suspension (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

This phenomenological research study was designed to examine high school administrator's understanding of alternatives to suspension in Virginia urban public schools. The phenomenological research study focused on the experience, use, and perception of a heterogenous group of high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools to examine their understanding of alternatives to suspension and to describe the alternatives to suspensions the administrators use the most (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher also wrote and described personal experiences and contexts that influenced the researcher's understanding with alternatives to suspension and preference for using specific alternatives to suspension (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher's personal experiences with and understanding of

alternatives to suspension were bracketed out of the interviews to limit bias and influence in the data outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Site Selection

This research study was conducted in Virginia urban public high schools. The setting allowed for similar demographics of students. School division policies and procedures differ in accessing, using, and assigning alternatives to suspension and how to respond when students are assigned exclusionary discipline. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) required all school divisions to implement and report student discipline based on the Student Behavior and Administrative Response (SBAR) collection. This allowed a consistent language and understanding between all high school administrators even though the administrators serve and are employed in different school divisions. Each school and participant were assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of confidentiality and reporting the research findings.

Sample

This study used purposive and snowball sampling to identify qualified participants with experience in Virginia urban public high schools until ten participants were secured. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: licensed administrator in the Commonwealth of Virginia; experience or employed as a high school principal or assistant principal in an urban high school in Virginia; more than five years of experience as an administrator; physically present in the United States; and knowledge and experience using the VDOE's Student Behavior and Administrative Response (SBAR) collection. There are 132 school divisions in Virginia, and 34 city centers across Virginia. Due to the study's focus and purpose, only high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools were included in the study. Participant identity and confidentiality were protected throughout the study.

Participants

Participants were recruited from Virginia urban public schools meeting urban criteria as outlined by the United States Census Bureau with preference given to school divisions with disproportionality in one or more areas identified by the VDOE which include over suspension of Black, Hispanic, or students with disabilities or over identification of Black or Hispanic students with disabilities. The researcher gathered data on the understanding of alternatives to suspension and the use of preferred alternatives to suspension from individual administrators. Divisions with disproportionality in one or more areas were prioritized in selecting participants. Divisions with disproportionality are required to provide additional professional learning and implementation of alternatives to suspension by the VDOE. This could allow participants to have a greater knowledge of alternatives to suspension.

Participant identity and confidentiality were protected throughout the study. The researcher sent an electronic invitation to all high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools and asked participants to volunteer for the study. Participants volunteered to participate by responding to email communications from the researcher requesting administrators with at least five years of experience in an urban high school setting in Virginia. The participants for this study were 10 administrators from urban high schools in Virginia. In addition, each administrator was familiar with the Student Behavior and Administrative Response (SBAR) from the VDOE. The participants were building level high school assistant principals or principals who participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews on a virtual platform. The high schools ranged in size, demographics, and accreditation status based on determination from the VDOE. All participants were assigned a

pseudonym for their name, school, and school division name to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and member checked.

Table 1 below indicates details about participants including pseudonym, years of experience in education, years of administrative experience, race, and gender. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. The table also provides additional information about the number of years, if any, the participant has as a building level principal.

Table 1

Participants Roles and Experience

Pseudonym	Years of Experience in Education	Years of Administrative Experience	Race	Gender
Administrator A	24	8 (2 as principal)	Black	Female
Administrator B	15	8 (4 as principal)	White	Male
Administrator C	23	7 (2 as principal)	Black	Male
Administrator D	18	10	White	Female
Administrator E	20	13 (6 as principal)	Black	Female
Administrator F	29	20	White	Male

Administrator G	23	7 (3 as principal)	Black	Male
Administrator H	24	11 (4 as principal)	Black	Female
Administrator I	19	15	Black	Male
Administrator J	19	11 (8 as principal)	White	Female

Data Collection Strategies

The interview process was guided by Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Yin (1994), Creswell and Creswell (2013), Creswell and Poth (2018), and Creswell and Creswell (2018). The urban administrators were interviewed and recorded using video conferencing software, Zoom, and the researcher used the recordings to transcribe then code the data. Open and axial coding was used to analyze the transcriptions and data to identify themes and categories in the data. Each one on one semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to accurately capture responses. Field notes were taken to supplement the interviews and data collection. Audio recordings were transcribed, and member-checked to allow participants to correct or exclude previously recorded comments. The researcher also made participants copies of the verbatim comments from their interviews for the participant to review and approve.

Interviews were conducted to allow participants to provide and describe to the researcher their personal experiences and perceptions. The individual interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow participants to share details and data in their own words without guidance or influence from the interviewer. The researcher also wrote memos to reflect on the

interviews and data collection during the research study. The researcher bracketed their personal and professional experiences with alternatives to suspension by setting aside their experiences as much as possible to take a fresh perspective on alternatives to suspension to limit the impact on data analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interviews

Interviews in this phenomenological study allowed the researcher to analyze for the "story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, and turning points, or epiphanies" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 198). The researcher designed questions to allow participants to be relaxed and open while discussing their understanding, experiences, and perceptions. The researcher set the environment and built rapport with the participants by listening and allowing the participants to provide the most detailed information and data as possible.

The essential part of identifying and collecting data on a phenomenon is to have a small number of participants that have experienced it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The individual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions with a conversational style, format, and manner. One-on-one interviews allowed participants to speak comfortably and freely with the interviewer asking probing questions to clarify and gather more detailed data as needed. The interviews were conducted on a videoconferencing software, Zoom, and allowed the participants to select their location. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The audio files and transcriptions were stored electronically with password protection on the device of the researcher. An additional copy of the audio files and transcriptions were also password protected and saved on the researcher's cloud. The interviews were member checked and peer reviewed.

Data Analysis Strategies

Open-ended, semi structured interview questions were designed by the researcher to allow participants to express their understanding, use, and knowledge of alternatives to suspension and their experiences utilizing alternatives to suspension. Participants provided in-depth, rich, and thick descriptions through open-ended, semi structured questions. The detail shared with the researcher allowed for greater data collection through the questions and qualitative research.

Themes from the analysis of significant statements were generated from the essential question and research sub-questions. The researcher analyzed the interview transcriptions and identified significant statements, sentences, or quotes from the participants to begin to understand how the participants experienced and perceived the phenomenon to code the statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher conducted line-by-line coding to identify connections, links, and comparisons in the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The coding repeated a second time with the incorporation of axial coding and continued until data saturation was reached (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data saturation is when the researcher gathered data until there were no new codes or themes added or identified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Axial coding assisted in connecting data and themes to identify and develop new categories and codes until there were no new codes and the data categories and codes were established and validated (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

The researcher developed clusters of meaning from the significant statements into codes or themes to write and develop a description of what the participants experienced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used the clusters of meaning to develop

and write a description of the context and setting of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher also wrote memos during the interviews and described their personal experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The essence or composite description of the phenomenon was then written by the researcher by connecting and analyzing the structural and textural descriptions of the phenomenon, and the researcher also included a personal statement on their experiences with alternatives to suspension (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

The researcher used data source triangulation by collecting data from urban high school administrators in different school divisions across Virginia to gain perspectives and validation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The interviews were conducted with administrators with varying years of administrative experience and a variety of administrative positions. Individual, semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for participants to share perspectives, understandings, and feelings on resources, values, issues, concerns, and needs within their schools to improve the data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher compared the data between participants to explore, enhance, and improve the understanding of alternatives to suspension (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

The researcher used open and axial coding throughout the data collection and research process. Codes were determined through line-by-line coding, and themes emerged through the perspectives, knowledge, and understanding of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The themes were analyzed and shaped into broad categories. The coding process occurred an

additional time using axial coding until data saturation was obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data saturation happened once the researcher collected data to the point where no new data is added or found (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018;). There were no additional or new themes, data, or categories identified by the researcher, and the researcher determined that the themes were validated and confirmed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Data analysis was on-going during the data collection phase of the research study. The original objectives and design of the phenomenological study were based on the Social Learning Theory developed by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1977; Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used the perceptions and knowledge of the participants to develop and refine the understanding of alternatives to suspension by urban high school administrators in Virginia. Social Learning Theory describes learning as a cognitive process that occurs in a social context through observing or direct instruction (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1988). Bandura (1977) provided three ways modeling influences behaviors as a person modeling or demonstrating a desired behavior; a description of the desired behavior through lesson planning and direct instruction; and modeling through videos, literature, social media, podcasts, and other media of the desired behavior (Bandura, 1977; Creswell & Creswell, 2013). For behavior to be modeled by others, four main components are needed. These components are attention, retention, reproduction, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1982). The researcher used this framework to develop interview questions, collect data, and analyze data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Albert Bandura developed Social Learning Theory in 1977. Social Learning Theory framework was used for this qualitative research study. This theoretical framework describes and explains how human behavior is learned through social interactions and observing the behavior of others (Bandura, 1977). To further learn and demonstrate learned behavior, the reinforcement learning models have been applied to study social learning and support individual learning through trial and error and those that support social learning (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). In addition, social learning theory provides the framework for how humans learn about others and how behavior is modeled (Velez & Gweon, 2021).

There are three main principles of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). The first is that a person learns behavior through observation (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). The second is a person's mental state and motivation is key to a person engaging in those behaviors (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). The third is observing a behavior in another person may not lead to a change in another person's behavior unless there is a reward or positive reinforcement (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019).

Modeling is when a person observes a behavior and reproduces it (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). Modeling is key to Social Learning Theory. There are four factors described in Social Learning Theory needed for a person to model a behavior (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). The first factor is attention which is when a person pays complete attention to other person's behavior (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). Retention is the second factor which is when a person commits the behavior to memory (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). The third factor is reproduction which is when a person exhibits the behavior (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). Reinforcement is the fourth factor which

is when a person is rewarded or positively reinforced for the behavior (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019).

Assessment of Quality and Rigor

Validity in qualitative research is essential (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Validity is determined by the accuracy of the research findings from the standpoint of the researcher, participants, and readers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher utilized credibility, trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability to determine validity and accuracy of their findings and for the assessment of quality and rigor (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Credibility

Triangulation of data by collecting information and data from a variety of sources increased the credibility of this research study. Triangulation was used to validate the data and research collected to determine consistencies and inconsistencies in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The interview transcripts were provided to each participant to be member-checked to review and edit data collection and confirm the information collected. Peer debriefing was conducted to provide participants with the opportunity to ask questions, clarify, or edit any statements from the transcriptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher's dissertation committee also questioned and reviewed the data collected and analyzed to determine if the research study was understandable and understood by others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

The researcher maintained confidentiality of the participants and actively protected the profile of the participants by removing identifiable information or using pseudonyms for any potentially identifiable information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher actively identified personal, social, political, and philosophical biases to reduce any influence or possible influence on the data collection or data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher pursued valid and accurate findings by uncovering multiple meanings and divergent perspectives to better understand the phenomenon in the research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Creswell Baez, 2021). The researcher's role and the methods of data collection are clearly defined and described to collect and analyze data (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is a "concept that takes into account the ever-changing contexts where research takes place and requires researchers to provide in-depth descriptions of their data collection methods" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 414). Thick description can assist with dependability by describing an observed situation that allows readers to develop their own interpretations (Leddy & Ormrod, 2019). Triangulation and member checking was conducted by the researcher. In addition, an audit trail was used to provide another level of dependability (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). An audit trail was a detailed listing of data collection and data analysis activities and procedures as they occurred during the research study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Confirmability

The researcher interprets data through the lens of their own experiences which guides and influences the writing and data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through reflexivity, the researcher described to the reader how their personal experiences influenced and impacted their interpretation of the data by sharing experiences with the phenomena being researched and clearly described the influence on their interpretation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The audit trail provided details of the data collection and data analysis so the results of the study can be confirmed by future research and assisted in increasing the confirmability of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of East Tennessee State University to conduct this research study. As part of the IRB approval process, the researcher submitted and received approval for the recruitment email and participant consent form. Participant consent was reviewed with each participant, obtained, and documented prior to conducting interviews. In addition, the researcher discussed the purpose and use of study data, avoided leading questions, did not share personal impressions, and did not share or identify confidential information.

Summary

Chapter 3 contained the methodology related to the essential research question: How do administrators in an urban school division in Virginia describe their experiences and perceptions of alternatives to suspension. The research questions and research design, site

selection, population and sample, participant information, data collection strategies, data analysis strategies, and assessment of quality and rigor are included. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study in relationship to the research questions and emergent themes. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of alternatives to suspension by urban high school administrators in Virginia. Suspension and other exclusionary discipline practices have an impact on students and how they progress academically, socially, and behaviorally (Hughes, 2022).

Qualitative interviews were conducted with ten administrators in urban Virginia high schools. The data for this study included semi-structured, open-ended individual interviews based on an essential research question and three supporting sub-questions. The questions related to how administrators understand alternatives to suspension, experiences with alternatives to suspension, the alternatives to suspension used most frequent by the administrator, barriers to use, practices that assist the administrator when using alternatives to suspension, and how the administrator perceives student, staff, and family participation in alternatives to suspension.

Participants

The participants for this study were 10 administrators from urban high schools in Virginia. The high schools ranged in size, demographics, and accreditation status based on determination from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). Participants volunteered to participate by responding to email communications from the researcher requesting administrators with at least 5 years of experience in an urban high school setting in Virginia. In addition, each administrator was familiar with the Student Behavior and Administrative Response (SBAR) from the VDOE. The years of experience of the 10 participants ranged from 15 to 29, and years

of administrative experience as an assistant or associate principal ranged from 7 to 20. Seven of the participants have building level head principal experience ranging from 2 to 8 years.

Research Questions

To understand the urban high school administrator's use of alternatives to suspension, the researcher developed an essential research question to guide the study: How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension?

To further guide this study, the researcher developed three supporting sub-questions to answer the essential research question.

SQ1: How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilize alternatives to suspension?

SQ2: Which alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools perceive to be successful?

SQ3: What alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools use the most?

Data Analysis

Transcriptions from the 10 interviews were reviewed and coded to identify emergent themes and categories. Analysis of the data from participant interviews reveals four themes. The four themes are: knowledge and awareness of alternatives to suspension, perceived effectiveness and impact, implementation challenges and barriers, and policy and legal considerations.

Theme 1: Knowledge and Awareness of Alternatives to Suspension

The theme of knowledge and awareness of alternatives to suspension included administrator responses that focused on general knowledge, understanding, and awareness of alternative responses to suspension. This theme encompassed administrator knowledge of existence, purpose, and potential benefits of alternatives to suspension such as restorative programs, counseling services, and other intervention strategies. For example, Administrator A reported:

> We have resources, in my division, we want to put interventions in place and have people come to the table. We have behavior specialists, attendance techs, academic school counselors, licensed counselors, graduation coaches, administrators, and mentoring programs. We want to come to the table with parents and students to see what is going on, work through it, and put a plan in place to keep them in school, to keep them engaged, off the streets so they can finish out their high school career. It is not always successful, but that's our goal.

Theme 2: Perceived Effectiveness and Impact

The theme of perceived effectiveness and impact included administrator responses on how they perceive the impact of alternatives to suspension on students' academic performance, behavior, well-being, and the overall school climate and culture. The theme also included their beliefs about whether these alternatives are effective in addressing behavioral issues and fostering a positive school culture. An example of perceived effectiveness was described by Administrator H:

We have a restoration room, the students can meditate, they have music, they have their own little stations, and they can just sit in there, put their head down and have time to reset themselves. That resource took time for teachers to get on board with, but once they did, it is our most successful alternative. We really utilize parent contacts and conferences. If you involve parents, nine out of 10 times, behavior will get better. We do other things like change their schedules, have counselors work with students in a group or individually.

Another example of perceived effectiveness and impact by using alternatives to suspension was from Administrator G. Administrator G reported that, "alternative schools have been positive for us when there are significant and dangerous, even extreme behaviors. Our scholars receive true instruction in a smaller classroom setting with additional supports."

Theme 3: Implementation Challenges and Barriers

The theme of implementation challenges and barriers included administrator responses about the practical challenges, obstacles, and barriers they encounter when trying to implement alternatives to suspension. The theme included factors such as resource limitations and allocations, staff professional development, and resistance from various stakeholders. Administrator E described the challenges and barriers experienced when utilizing alternatives to suspension:

It depends on how supportive the parent is. If they get in a fight, and they say my mom said to come get in a fight. I confirm that with them, it is tough to give an alternative because I am fighting a system, I do not have any tools for. Their baby can sit at home with them [*sic*] for a few days.

Theme 4: Policy and Legal Considerations

The theme of policy and legal considerations included administrator responses related to administrators' understanding of the policy and legal framework that guides and governs disciplinary responses in Virginia public schools. The theme included their awareness of relevant state or division policies, regulations, and legal constraints that influence, impact, and determine their decision-making regarding alternatives to suspension. Administrator D described certain alternatives to suspension are forced by policy or procedures as, "we have to quit picking up the obvious crumbs and go for the cookie that is stuffed and being crushed under the chair." Each participant noted the pressure and difficulty they have with balancing the needs of students and the required policy or procedural guidance they are expected to follow when implementing interventions to behaviors and alternatives to suspension.

Supporting Sub- Question 1

How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilize alternatives to suspension?

Throughout interviews, participants discussed the process of responding to a discipline incident or a discipline referral from a staff member. Each participant reported staff use effective classroom management strategies and implement alternative responses to inappropriate behavior that is disruptive to their classes. Administrator A describes staff responses:

> I would say maybe 80% of the staff members have exhausted other resources and it just comes to the point where they have exhausted other resources, and the referral is warranted because of the interventions they have put in place.

Another focus from the participants was how staff, including administrators, build relationships with students in order to utilize alternatives to suspension. Administrator C stated:

> There has to be a consequence attached to the behavior along with the opportunity to rebuild the relationship. We cannot say we are here for kids, love kids, and are here for relationships if we are not providing restorative justice practices.

Building relationships was discussed by each participant as the key starting place to utilizing alternatives to suspension. Several participants indicated there are non-negotiables needed in order to have an environment that is nurturing and accepting of the use of alternatives to suspension.

One of the areas of importance participants noted that were needed to use and understand how to use alternatives to suspension is a consistent agreement from staff on responses to behavior. Administrator D reported the perceived feelings from teachers and staff, "kids out of class is never, never what you want unless they are absolutely ruining the environment for everyone else." This also assists in building a culture and climate within the school community, including students and their caregivers, of the expectations after a behavior has impacted the school environment. Administrator A stated, "when a student does get a suspension, we have a reinstatement conference with the parents, and then have a suspension contract to outline the behaviors expected when the student returns to school." This supports the ability of staff to model restorative practices and for staff to have an opportunity to teach and address the behavior and expectations.

Relationships and providing an environment of trust were also discussed by each participant. Participants described how the time and effort spent early in the school year can

assist in how alternatives are used, and which alternatives are assigned. Administrator F stated:

> The biggest thing is the relationships with kids and taking that time to get to know them and to get them to trust you. It may not really be an alternative to suspension so much, but it is. There is no one magic book, no one thing that I can say, if you do this, will make a difference other than investing time up front, investing that time with those kids figuring out who the kids are that are probably going to end up in your office at some point, and get to know them before that happens.

Having a set plan and communication between administrators in the same building was noted by several participants. Planning how alternatives to suspension will be used in a building and advocating for resources to implement different alternatives to suspension was reported by participants. Administrator G described the process:

> Space and capacity for implementing alternatives to suspension is hard. … I have five assistant principals, and we all step in to help and work through behaviors with students. We try to have the same response so it does not really matter who the student works with, they will all have the same options. We have almost a therapeutic model. … this year we added a freshman academy. We have staff and processes in place to support the students, to teach them expectations, and how to do school. Mentoring, tutoring, counseling, whatever they need, we provide.

Participants each described the alternatives to suspension they use the most in their buildings, and each participant discussed the importance of addressing the reasons behind behaviors. Participants noted how they involved other staff members, typically school

counselors or mental health providers, as an almost immediate step when behaviors occur. Administrator H said:

> We have three main alternatives we go to. We do a lot of counseling; our school
> counselors stay busy. We have added a licensed counselor to help this year… We also
> do parent conferences and student conferences. …we try to give some time in those to
> making things right and restoring relationships.

Additionally, Administrator I described how using staff with specific skills and education on responding to behaviors and the root cause for behaviors are used:

> The first 3 days of school are the most important for our school and students. We put
> in practices and teach students how to be students. This is overlooked in high schools.
> In my case, a lot of our students have not been successful on state tests or in classes,
> and there is no more social promotion. So we start preventive and with education on
> expected behaviors and consequences. We cannot keep suspending students, we want
> them there, and we keep them longer or on Saturdays. Students know what alternatives
> are available to them to use, mentoring, school counseling, licensed counselors,
> behavior specialists, mediation, restorative justice, reset spaces, and other SEL tools.

Maintaining a non-negotiable of implementing alternatives to suspension were noted by participants, and they further detailed the preventive work and how they provide staff with the skills to implement strategies in their classrooms to prevent office referrals. Administrator J stated:

> Throughout my building built into the master schedule, I set a non-negotiable of
> building culture through circles. This allows our students and staff to set time to build

relationships and to try to eliminate some of the problems before they even start. We

try to use Check In Check Out for students requiring more support, we build good

relationships, and model good conversations on how to build and repair relationships

that in turn builds social skills.

Supporting Sub-Question 2

Which alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public

schools perceive to be successful?

The participants reported several alternatives to suspension as successful. Consistently

each administrator identified restorative practices and mediation as a successful alternative.

Administrator E described the process utilized:

We give kids processing time. They need to be able to talk about what made them

upset, understand what happened from someone else's perspective, how you know

they violated them, or how you made them feel insecure, scared, or some other way.

… once you give them some voice, they are open, and most of the tussles … are not

long-term feuds that interrupt the school day.

Another alternative to suspension consistently used by administrators is additional

time spent in school. Administrator C described how his approach to this alternative to

suspension came to be one of his most successful:

Students stay late, come in early, and come on Saturdays. I learned the hard way, I

suspended a student, and after his suspension, he came back in with new haircut,

shoes, and clothes. That confirmed I did not have his parent's support, so I didn't

suspend him again, but we got to know each other after school and on Saturdays for a long time until he got tired of seeing me and decided to make other decisions.

Administrator F described how trying new or different alternatives to suspension was based on the needs within the building. Administrator F noted the use of available staff and research-based alternatives to suspension to address the specific needs of students. Administrator F stated:

> We have a school within a school program, and this year we added a reset program which is basically a room that is staffed with somebody who has a lot of experience in working with kids and tries to get kids back on track. For example, you find a kid in the hallway, and they're not in class or where they are supposed to be rather than immediately jumping to suspension, the kid doesn't need to sit in in-school suspension for the entire day. We get them in that reset room and talk a little bit about what's going on, and then try to get them back to class.

In addition, Administrator G said:

> We have a lot of success with mediation. These kids hold grudges for years, and I think there is a lot of apathy and maybe distrust of the process. There is a lot of anger, and they don't know what to do with it. They have never been able to express their anger, particularly at adults, in ways that are healthy.

Participants each noted the success of having alternatives to suspension that provide space for students involved in more serious incidents to receive their education along with additional supports and services away from the large school environment. Administrator F described:

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Instead of giving a student a 5-day suspension, we have a location, not in our building, where kids can go for that 5 days, to receive instruction and get help with their work. This is huge because they are not sitting at home or on the streets.

Having community and outside agencies providing services and supports to students and their families when a behavior or incident occurs was noted by each participant. Each participant described the success of having someone outside of the school address needs so the student and family can maintain confidentiality while receiving the services they need. Administrator H reported:

We have about 30% of our student body receiving services from outside agencies, mostly counseling and mentoring. They not only work with our students, but also with our parents, which is really needed. You would think with 30% receiving services, we would have enough, but really we could use some more.

All participants report successful utilization of alternatives to suspension was controlled by the relationships staff has with students and the experience of staff in working with students. Administrator I said:

It's not necessarily about using in-school suspension or counseling, but it's about relationships with our students. First, you have to change the mindset of the people that have the most power, which are the teachers and instructional assistants. Those are the people who are really, truly interacting with our students. So if people would like time to step out of their own biases, for their own fears about teaching Black children or children different from them, that they maybe don't understand or want to understand. What does it truly mean to work in an urban school setting, and accept the fact that the culture is very different. We have to focus on teaching the adults about the poverty mindset. … the

number one is recognizing that there are barriers that students living in underserved communities have to deal with that students in other areas do not.

Further, Administrator J stated:

Having the same language and known responses to behaviors has been really successful. We struggled with consistency and buy-in, and teachers and staff knowing what to expect and how to have similar conversations in the classroom or during transition has made a huge difference. Social emotional learning infused throughout the curriculum and specifically listed in our lesson plans has given us the consistent language across the school.

Participants report successful implementation of alternatives to suspension were enhanced by parent and caregiver participation along with buy-in to the process. Administrator I stated:

Involving parents has to happen, especially parents that are not invested or supportive. If parents give no leeway, I'll make them come in for a reinstatement conference. If they tell me they can't come in, I will have the student call their parent to come to the school or I'll send the student back home. The more you force involvement and to inconvenience the parent, it'll finally click for the parent, and we can start having some conversations. It works every time for me.

Supporting Sub-Question 3

What alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools use the most?

Each participant shared their experiences with the alternatives to suspension they use most. The participants shared their most used alternatives are based on resources in their buildings and how their administrative team or division level prescribed responses. As an example of how building level teams develop plans, Administrator B stated, "our whole administrative team feels comfortable sitting down with two students, maybe pulling in the school counselor to assist, and to do a mediation when we notice or hear something brewing between students." An additional description provided by Administrator E stated:

> We rely heavily on mediation, and we use in-school suspension a lot. Our suspension numbers decreased last year because we had a fantastic in-school suspension coordinator who was great at talking to kids about why they were in there, how they change behavior, and what are some alternatives to what you did. Having someone strong in there really helps kids understand.

Participants detailed how alternatives to suspension they use most change and fluctuate based on individual student need and student behaviors. Administrator F described:

> It is hard for teachers to give all they have and still have disruptions. We have two very frequent flyers, and I saw them today with our student success specialist. They stayed with her and completed work the entire day. She told me she saw them at 9:15 and could tell it was going to be a day, so she scooped them up and kept them. That's the thing for those two individuals that have the highest of high needs. That level of support is really not scalable, but she can do that for those two. There are 20 other kids that would benefit from that level of support. If we had more staff, we should provide that to those other 20 that would benefit.

Participants noted that the length of time administrators and teachers have worked together makes an impact on how alternatives to suspension are used most in their buildings. One participant described how most of their administrative staff had worked together for over 20 years so the most used alternatives to suspension have changed based on student need and staff experience. Administrator F provided additional detail:

> We use PBIS, and we want our teachers to connect with our students and see kids in a different light. We give our staff what we call the Golden Ticket, so they can take their entire family, for free, to an event each semester. It has been huge for our students and staff. They are able to see a student perform and support kids. That is a very powerful thing because it gives teachers an opportunity to see that kid in a different light and see how they act on the field or on the stage. It means so much to the kids because some of them never have a parent come to one game or event."

Participants also detailed collaborating with outside or community resources as a most used alternative to suspension for students requiring intensive supports and services. The participants noted that outside and community services were typically combined with other alternatives to suspension within the school or division. Administrator G described:

> We added a case manager through our community services board to work through modules on different topics when students are in in-school suspension. We try to bring kids back and spend some time with the case manager to work through things.

Another example from Administrator H was:

> We have to have enough bodies to help with this. This is a whole team approach. ... We have specialists, key players, solid communication, and a consistent plan. … We have a

dean of operations, and we run the data by time and place of discipline referrals. Time and location is important for the administrative team and teachers. We start with the department chairs and teacher leaders first to respond and make sure all staff are responding and preventing issues or conflict. Then we come together to solve and brainstorm. We share the data and provide professional development and make a response for each of the highflyers. Central office has also provided us with resources to come up with a wide range of alternatives to suspensions, whether it is a different location or more staff and counselors to help our students. It has to be a division-wide approach.

Each participant reported most of their alternatives to suspension utilize knowledge and experience of the whole child. Administrator I described what the administrator determines to be the most successful and most used alternatives to suspension:

The most successful is looking at the child holistically. Let's look at the discipline history of the child. If there is already a pattern of fighting, we might put the child through our student assistance team after the first fight to see if there are some interventions we could put in place. We would also look at their academic history and see if there might be something they missed in elementary or middle school, and we might go through the child study team to see if the student needs a functional behavior assessment.

Administrator J stated:

We use restorative practices. I went to training and have since sent several of my staff to be trainers as well. We have seen a difference in having to suspend students, but mostly in the conversations our staff have on a regular basis with students and especially when they intervene in conflict between students.

Summary

Chapter 4 presents the data analysis related to the essential research question, how do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension. The supporting sub-questions addressed how high school administrators use alternatives to suspension, which alternatives to suspension administrators perceive to be successful, and which alternatives to suspension administrators use the most. The social learning theory framework was used to examine and categorize data into four themes. Major themes are identified as knowledge and awareness of alternatives to suspension, perceived effectiveness and impact, implementation challenges and barriers, and policy and legal considerations. The interpretation of the data relating to the emergent themes, summaries, recommendations, and conclusions are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate perceptions of alternatives to suspension in urban high school administrators in Virginia. The research study consists of five chapters. In Chapter 1, the researcher introduced the research topic, significance of the study, and discussed limitations and delimitations. Chapter 2 contained a review of relevant literature on the research topic. Chapter 3 described the researcher's methodology and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 presented the results of the semi-structured individual interviews and emergent themes that were presented throughout the data collection. The data provided the researcher with rich, in-depth descriptions of urban high school administrator perceptions of alternatives to suspension which align with relevant literature. A summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter 5.

Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to investigate perceptions of alternatives to suspension in urban Virginia high schools. The essential research question was: how do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension? The qualitative methodology was guided by three supporting research questions:

1. How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilize alternatives to suspension?

2. Which alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools perceive to be successful?

3. What alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools use the most?

Essential Research Question:

How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension?

During the interviews, the central focus of the participants was the awareness and knowledge of alternatives to suspension which impacts the use and comfortability of administrators utilizing a variety of alternatives to suspension. Discipline reform relies on changes in administrator mindset to positively impact school culture and student achievement (Berkovich & Grinshtain, 2018; Craig & Martin, 2023). Participants confirmed this, specifically Administrator A stated:

> I've seen where a staff member may have wanted the outcome to be a suspension, but once you peel back the layers, there were some factors that the staff member kind of tainted so I could not give a suspension because the staff member was in the wrong as well.

Administrator and staff competence is essential when implementing strategies that are based on social emotional learning and fostering student learning and well-being (Gimbert et al., 2023; Jennings et al., 2017).

Administrators described how prevention and intervention strategies for students are their primary goal, and in expanding on this, Administrator E stated:

> Out of transparency, I am not sure how many alternatives there are to suspension. I think often we try many alternatives prior to suspension. As an administrator for the last 12, 13

years, we have always begged for additional resources. Give us something we can use as an alternative to suspension. We try to keep kids in school as opposed to out of school.

The prevention and intervention strategies described by participants align with the processes in social learning theory to teaching behavior (Vrieling et al., 2019; Wheeler & Richey, 2019). In addition, Administrator E described how the alternatives to suspension are structured and used in combination with responses to behavior and classroom management practices:

> I have a great staff that are not interested in kids going home. It can't just be me saying I don't want this kid to go home because that is not effective. But when my staff come to the administrator and say so and so did this. I am letting you know, but I really would like to have them stay for after school detention, and then they are going to work on a bulletin board with me and talk about whatever happened.

Participants described how they use and understand alternatives to suspension by utilizing systems developed in their building (Center on PBIS, 2023; Gage et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott t al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). Administrator F detailed how they build a preventative and responsive system for students prior to students starting the school year to prepare and structure resources based on need:

> We have conversations with the middle school to find out the kids that are going to be a challenge and start developing relationships with them from day one. ... Finding ways to get kids involved in school really makes a difference. I find that the more a kid is invested in their building, and the more that they have a relationship with the adults in the building, the less likely they are to do something. They worry that are going to let somebody down, and that is a huge piece for us.

Professional learning was a key to each participant's structure and understanding of alternatives to suspension to improve their own work along with increasing the knowledge and understanding within their schools which relates to the research on how to improve emotional responses (Pollock et al., 2023; Tubin & Pinyan-Weiss, 2014). Administrator F said:

> There are kids that have been dealt a bad hand, and just can't get out of their own way. I think 20 years ago, they would have dropped out. If you're able to do some of these alternatives, I do think there is a huge positive impact on them. They are the ones that come visit after they graduate and are so thankful.

The participants outlined the extensive alternatives to suspension provided to students (Craig & Martin, 2023; Smith Ramey & Duis, 2022; Tarver et al., 2022). Additionally, Administrator H reported:

> We work with a wide range of incentives and positive behavior supports to prevent disruptive behaviors. We have full buy-in of staff, which makes it possible, because if somebody breaks the chain or if they are inconsistent, it doesn't work well. We started a lot of these practices I started using without really having a name for it. We start with positive connections and relationships with students and their families. Our staff makes those positive phone calls before class even starts, getting to know the families. Then, when we have issues with behaviors in class, our teachers and administrators are able to make those calls. Sometimes our teachers do not have to make a referral to the office because they are able to handle it because of their relationships. As administrators, we use progressive discipline with an alternative to suspension used for each referral. We have a call log database that I check before we process a consequence for the student.

Our teachers are well aware that they have to make those contacts. Our teachers know our expectations about contacting home before writing a referral.

Participants explained their processes and procedures to using alternatives to suspension to respond to different levels of behaviors and referrals made to administration. Communication and a clear understanding within their administrative teams, students, caregivers, and staff was described by participants (Hughes, 2022; Karami-Akkary et al., 2019; Ogwumike et al., 2022). Administrator I stated:

We start with conferences, we call them transition meetings, where we bring the parent in and really focus on behavior. We talk about alternatives ways, about what else could have been done, what could the child have done instead of responding, mostly in fighting. We also have conversations with students, usually with insubordination or disrespect to teachers. We talk with them about what respect looks like and other PBIS strategies. Coming from marginalized communities, one of the things they needed was a way to process their emotions and views in a healthy way.

Administrator H further described:

We have implemented a restoration room which has replaced our in-school suspension room. In there, we have a person who is trained in de-escalation practices. We also have a meditation room. In that room, we have meditation stations. They can sit on flexible seating, like a ball, or put their head down and just remove themselves from this situation for a little while. We try not to use it for more than one class per student. It is monitored, and the assistant takes care of the documentation. If we have to use it for a consequence, we also follow the SBAR for our division. We try our best to avoid out of school suspension. This also helps with our accreditation and chronic absenteeism rate.

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Teachers, students, and parents are more open to using alternatives and to buy into it

when they realize how much it impacts by them being in school.

An overall understanding and structured approach to using alternatives to suspension was

clear from each participant. The main goal and focus of involving stakeholders in alternatives to

suspension through consistent language and communication was expressed by participants

(Anderson, 2019; Berkovich & Grinshtain, 2018; Hughes, 2022). Administrator J said:

It is a collective, collaborative approach set up through proactive measures to have less

suspensions and time away from instruction. We have to have multiple options for

students based on the behavior … we try to connect every consequence with a restorative

practice to build relationships no matter the person involved, students, staff, or parents.

Additionally, Administrator I described the approach similar to each participant in having a

range of alternatives and a semi-structured plan for implementation unless a serious and

significant incident occurs as:

The first time I get a kid sent to me, I probably won't suspend them. I use teaching as the

first tool. I might also involve a behavior specialist and utilize strategies they put in place

or suggest. For the second incident, I would use other alternatives and ways to holistically

approach this to really support the child.

The approaches described by the participants are aligned with social learning theory's four

elements to teach desired behaviors (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Wheeler & Richey, 2019).

Theme 1: Knowledge and Awareness of Alternatives to Suspension

Overall, each participant had knowledge, understanding, and awareness of alternatives to

suspension. The data from the interviews showed that using alternatives to suspension is a

typical response for perceived lesser offenses or behaviors in the school environment; however, each participant indicated the use of alternatives to suspension are not used with more severe offenses such as possession or use of certain weapons, selling drugs, or sexual assaults. As indicated in research, when administrators use prevention strategies and interventions, exclusionary discipline decreased (Eyllon et al., 2022; Gage et al., 2022; Gregory et al., 2011; Marting, 2022; McIntosh et al., 2021). Administrators interviewed noted they sometimes used alternatives to suspension along with exclusionary discipline for some incidents. Participants also recognized the use of alternatives to suspension to lessen the number of days assigned out of school suspension which utilizes the two main concepts from social learning theory (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Nickerson, 2022). Social learning theory provides that people learn desired behaviors through observing behaviors and mental factors that determine when a behavior is learned (Bandura, 1977). Administrator I stated, "that's something else you have to do in school, create boundaries for students, and they're not used to that, especially with social media, that has made it so hard. The pandemic then made it even harder with boundaries."

A critical part of utilizing alternatives to suspension based on participants was knowledge and understanding the options available, purpose and experience using each alternative to suspension, and the potential benefit the alternatives to suspension had on students and the school environment (Gimbert et al., 2021; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Hwang et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Lustick, 2021; Lustick, 2022; Pope & Zuo, 2022). When the administrator determined they only had one or two alternatives to suspension, for a multitude of reasons, the administrator tended to know and use those alternatives the most based on their self-report. Administrators assigned students who exhibited interpersonal conflict, off-task behaviors, and disrupted class some type of alternative to suspension (Craig & Martin, 2023; Curran & Finch, 2020; Fronius et

al., 2019; Gregory & Evans, 2020; McGruder, 2019). All administrator participants noticed that they all utilized restorative practices, in-school suspension, make-up time, counseling or mental health supports, positive behavior interventions and supports, and conferences as part of their responses to behaviors, and these responses align to research (Bal, 2018; Gadsden, 2017; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Hughes, 2022; Lustick, 2021; Rodriquez & Welsh, 2022; Skiba et al., 2014; Stewart & Ezell, 2022; Sugai et al., 2011).

Increasing time students are in their classrooms with their teachers was reported by each administrator as the main reason for providing alternatives to suspension with also recognizing that all students need to be in school as much as possible. Rewarding on-task and appropriate behavior was recognized through research as also a way to increase academic performance, and this relates directly to how social learning theory describes learning new behavior (Bandura, 1977; Velez & Gweon, 2021). All administrator participants noted that positive rewards or removing rewards are used most often for minor behavioral incidents. For more significant discipline incidents involving verbal or physical altercations between students or students and staff, all administrators interviewed recognized they used restorative practices or some type of mediation which is supported by research (Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2018; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014). According to research, restorative practices and mediation have been found to positively impact the school environment (Craig & Martin, 2019; Fronius et al., 2019; Lustick, 2021; Skiba et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Perceived Effectiveness and Impact

The data provided from this study suggested that alternatives to suspension are best implemented when alternatives are consistently used by all administrators in one school, and this is supported by research (Anderson, 2019; Gregory et al., 2022; Hughes, 2022; Maeng et al.,

2019; Tubin & Pinyan-Weiss, 2014). Administrators reported the desire and need to have a plan for implementing alternatives to suspension, so students, families, staff, and stakeholders know and understand expectations and responses to student behavior. All participants interviewed reported effectiveness with restorative practices when resolving conflict between students and between students and a staff member (Anyon et al., 2016; Armour, 2016; Braithewaite, 2003; Lodi et al., 2021; Mirsky, 2007). Administrators and research also indicated in this study the importance of positive relationships between administrators, staff, and students assists with the effectiveness and impact of alternatives to suspension (Anderson, 2019; Caspe et al., 2018; Tarver et al., 2022).

When alternatives to suspension are used consistently across the school, all participants recognized there was an increase in student academic performance, behavior, and well-being (Anderson, 2019; Karami-Akkary et al., 2019; Rafa, 2019). In addition, participants noted that school climate and culture could be negatively impacted if alternatives to suspension were not discussed, explained, and detailed with staff members. Participants stated that staff members report not being supported and have negatively commented on staff surveys when there was not a clear, defined plan communicated to staff and stakeholders, including students. All participants reported struggles during the first year or two of implementation with stakeholder participation and buy-in; however, most participants indicated improvement with effectiveness and having a greater impact on student achievement, behavior, and well-being once a clear and consistent plan was implemented across the school and division. The struggle and needed time to process the changes before improvement is noted connects with the four elements of demonstrating new behaviors described by social learning theory (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Nickerson, 2022; Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vrieling et al., 2019). Administrator F reported:

I do not see a lot of discussion about what other students think. The kids that don't get in

trouble, or the kids that might be in a little bit of trouble. Are we inadvertently, by trying

to save the ones that are really getting into a ton of trouble, what message are we sending

the others?

All participants indicated some alternatives to suspension are more effective in

addressing behavioral issues and fostering a positive school culture than others. Restorative

practices, counseling, and positive behavior interventions and supports are more effective based

on participants in this study and noted in research (Craig & Martin, 2019; Eyllon et al., 2022;

Gage et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2023; Lustick, 2021; Maeng et al., 2020; Skiba et al.,

2014). Participants noted that some alternatives to suspension, in-school suspension, alternative

placements, and timeouts assist in giving students time away from conflict and to repair the harm

within the school setting through counseling, mediation, and restorative practices. Participants

described the positive impact a combined approach to discipline had on the school environment

and improving the climate and culture, and this related to how social learning theory outlines

how student learn new behavior (Bandura, 1977; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Wheeler &

Richey, 2019). However, participants did report there was increased effectiveness and impacts

on student achievement, behavior, and well-being when students and staff felt the alternatives to

suspension addressed the root cause of an incident and worked towards restoring relationships

and dignity after an incident as also described in research (Marting et al., 2022; Nese et al., 2020;

Pope & Zuo, 2022; Vincent et al., 2012).

Theme 3: Implementation Challenges and Barriers

The participants in this study recognized numerous implementation challenges and

barriers. The challenges and barriers include funding, time, space, additional staff, time for

professional development, staff buy-in, student engagement, and parent participation. Research aligned with these challenges and barriers (Augustine et al., 2018; Bal et al., 2019; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Liu et al., 2022; Novak, 2021). There was a noted struggle with budget and time from all participants. There were a few participants that felt they had enough staff to effectively implement alternatives to suspension; however, the time to provide professional learning to all staff was almost impossible (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Berkovich & Grinshtain, 2018).

Participants indicated the process of implementation can cause negative impacts while working through learning about alternatives to suspension and best practices for implementation along with staff. Administrator C stated:

I looked up one day, during my first year truly implementing alternatives to suspension, and realized I had 15 Black boys in my office. I needed a change, this is not where these kids should be, granted they are here in school doing work, but this is not where these kids should be right now, they need to be in the classroom. I needed to be much more proactive. I was unintentionally rewarding students for negative behaviors, totally unintentional. I was trying to help the teachers. Right? I am going to get the kids and they will come with me. But it also impacts your relationships with teachers as well because I was listening to the students and not hearing from the teacher. I found myself in a bad position where I was undermining her authority and my relationship with the teacher was cracking. I had to look at things different and find a more restorative way.

Several other participants discussed similar issues with implementation and noted how important it was to model restorative practices with staff to show the importance throughout the implementation process. Social learning theory confirms the importance of modeling during

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implementing new behavior (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Nickerson, 2022; Velez & Gweon, 2021).

Additional barriers noted by all participants include mandated responses by either the VDOE or central office administrators. This barrier seemed to give administrators the most difficulty when leading their buildings with other staff members or with parents (Gregory et al., 2022; Perry & Morris, 2014; Rosenbaum, 2022; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Several participants indicated if parents were not satisfied with the consequence assigned to their student, that the parent would complain to central office staff administrators or to school board members and the consequence would be adjusted to satisfy the parent. This causes a level of distrust, as described by Administrator D as:

> You can train us all you want. If when we implement a consequence, a parent goes to the school board or superintendent, and we have to back it all down, what is the point? We are all pretty paralyzed in that case. I think a lot of people in this whole process feel undermined by parents.

> Administrator H stated:

> When were in the cohort through a university for PBIS, this provided the professional development and structure we needed to do PBIS within our school. Now, our division has collective bargaining, so we are not allowed to have anything outside of their regular hours which really impacts our ability to provide the skills everyone needs to understand alternatives to suspension.

Administrator H also recognized that:

Our parents sometimes do not know how to advocate for their children, because we have a lot of kids who are still first generation high school graduates. They know they want their kids in school and that is the best thing for them, but they do not know how to advocate. So we have to educate our family along with their student. The parents sometimes get upset with the consequences, but it is usually because they do not understand. We had a two on one fight, and when we went to the hearing, I had to help advocate for the student to receive counseling because of things the mother and kid shared with me, but the mother would not have been able to advocate in the right way for her student to come back to school and to get the help she needed to change.

Administrator I stated:

From 2008-2013, parenting changed, and our practices had to change. Parents stopped coming to school. They started telling me things like they can't come, I did my job to get them to school, you handle it. I had to change how I engaged and forced parent engagement in the process.

Administrator I stated:

I think parents really appreciate us working with their kid. They really don't have to deal with them at home causing havoc while they are trying to work. Parents will be thankful we are working with their student, but then we are right back in the same place with the student seeking attention from the parent because the parents aren't at home because they are working so much. Nobody's at home to give them what they need outside of school.

Further, Administrator I continued to discuss barriers with implementing alternatives to suspension:

I will call up a parent and tell her, ma'am, I'm trying to talk to your son, and he isn't

responding to me. Can you please let me know what you do at home? That's the way he

treats me the same way, and I'm like, I get it. He is going to spend some time with you,

and I need you to talk to your child. She told me she had done her part; she got him there.

You need to do the rest. I told her no, we are doing this together.

Implementation challenges and barriers described by participants in this theme are analogous

with the operational and enactive learning described in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977;

Nickerson, 2022; Vrieling et al., 2019; Wheler & Richey, 2019).

Theme 4: Policy and Legal Considerations

In 2020, the VDOE developed and mandated all public school divisions in Virginia

utilize the Student Behavior and Administrative Response (SBAR) data collection to report

student behavior and the administrative responses to the behaviors (VDOE, 2020). School

divisions were provided with The Development of the Virginia Board of Education's Model

Guidance for Student Code of Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension and The

Components of the Virgina Board of Education's Model Guidance for Student Code of Conduct

Policy to use to develop division specific documents (VDOE, 2020).

As described by Administrator D, "we have very little wiggle room in the system to do

anything with them. It's very frustrating." Further, Administrator F reported, "we give a student

survey every year, and our students feel their peers get away with a lot. That goes back to not

being allowed to give students a break after significant behaviors happen." Administrator F

discussed a little later in the interview:

When I look at all the alternatives to suspension, I wish the state and central office would respect me as a professional with my four degrees and let me do what I know needs to be done when students make a mistake. I have been putting alternatives to suspension in place for 20 years, and I think my experience with kids does more than what the SBAR tells me I have to do.

Researchers have outlined alternative approaches to zero-tolerance policies to include addressing the root causes of negative behavior and to provide consequences aligned with the offense as is described by the participants and this theme (Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2014; Wang, 2022; Williams et al., 2022).

Policy and legal considerations outlined by participants relate to the tenets of social learning theory through connecting to the fourth element, motivation (Nickerson, 2022). Motivation as well as policy and legal considerations described by the participants connect through direct reinforcement, vicarious reinforcement, and self-reinforcement (Bandura, 1977; Nickerson, 2022; Vreiling et al., 2019). The local determinations provided to the participants through SBAR structure the reinforcement which further connects to social learning theory (Velez & Gweon, 2021; Vreiling et al., 2019; Wheeler & Richey, 2019).

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the interview results and literature review in Chapter 2, the following recommendations were made after considering the experiences urban high school administrators had while using alternatives to suspension. These recommendations are intended to support urban administrators when they are developing and implementing alternatives to suspension within a supported and structured educational environment.

The first implication is to meet the need of students through a structured plan for responding to behaviors by using and clearly explaining alternatives to suspension. The plan should detail the how, why, and when alternatives to suspension will be used. In addition, using alternatives to suspension with fidelity and consistency should be of utmost importance. Providing measures of effectiveness and the ability of the administrator to move and adjust the alternatives to suspension based on individual student need used should be incorporated into the plan. This would include school and division wide strong tier 1 social emotional learning curriculum and instruction to teach and reteach expected behaviors and responses.

The second implication is to design and provide ongoing professional learning for administrators and staff on basic understanding of alternatives to suspension, how to implement alternatives to suspension, and the benefits of alternatives to suspension. It is recommended that all staff members receive professional learning on alternatives to suspension to limit confusion and to assist with building a collaborative and safe learning environment supporting staff and students. Formal professional learning, book studies, professional learning communities, shadowing, and mentoring opportunities for staff should be included as professional learning opportunities.

The third implication is to increase support and specialized staffing at the school and division levels to support students and the alternatives to suspension to meet the individual needs of students. Increasing the number of staff available with education in mental health and responding to behavioral needs is needed. There is also a lack of available staff that have the required training and expertise. Providing the education and training for currently employed staff to increase and improve the licensed and trained staff is also recommended.

The fourth implication for practice is for administrators and staff to focus on educating students and caregivers on processes, procedures, and resources available to support unique needs of students and families. Providing and educating on the resources offered as a norm to students and families will assist in alleviating pressures and societal issues impacting students and families, especially in marginalized communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

The sample size allowed for saturation and was sufficient to answer the research questions; however, the study should be conducted in the future with a larger sample size. The researcher did not interview high school administrators in every urban school division in Virginia, so this limits the ability to make broad generalizations, recommendations, and proposals for urban high schools in Virginia. A future study with a large number of participants from each urban school division in Virginia would allow for more sources and data to identify concerns and to make more detailed recommendations for practice.

This study focused on administrator perceptions and future studies could incorporate student, family, and teacher perceptions of alternatives to suspension. In addition, future studies could explore the impact of alternatives to suspension have on academic achievement, chronic absenteeism, climate and culture of the school, and long-term impact on staff turnover.

The study participants outlined the need and desire for professional learning opportunities focusing on implementation of alternatives to suspension. In addition, several participants recognized the need for statewide professional learning for consistency across the state outside of the discipline codes and entry system. The participants identified this as a great opportunity for the VDOE to provide this to each school division similar to the materials provided for the data entry and coding process.

This study could be replicated in suburban or rural school divisions in addition to expanding to elementary and/or middle schools to identify administrator perceptions. The expansion into other school divisions or into other levels of school would provide the researcher with more comparable data across multiple environments.

Summary

Chapter 5 presents the interpretation and discussion of data related to how high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension. The framework of social learning theory was used to guide the process. Alternatives to suspension have increased over the past fifteen years and have seen a greater focus since the Covid-19 pandemic. Responses to behavior within the school environment can build a safer and more effective learning environment by preventing behaviors and intervening when behaviors escalate. School staff utilize many alternatives to suspension and practices including restorative practices, trauma informed practices, social emotional learning, functional behavior assessments, culturally responsive practices, and other practices to respond and address the needs of the whole child.

Data analysis from this study showed that administrators understand alternatives to suspension and use different alternatives to suspension based on the individual student, the incident, and their school division guidelines. Administrators want to respond to behaviors and incidents in the school environment based on the individual needs of the student and situational factors. Administrators need guidance to the support and resources available to guide, intervene, and educate students on behaviors and social interactions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Information and Protocols

Researcher introduces self, reviews the process and procedures for the interview, how long interview will last, and format of the questions. Researcher reviews the purpose of the research and how the findings will be reported, shared, and used. Researcher informs interviewee how data will be stored, secured, maintained, and destroyed after a specific time.

Informed Consent: Consent form was provided to the interviewees at least 24 hours prior to the interview, researcher will answer questions then obtain verbal or written consent and permission to record the interview. Interview will proceed if verbal consent is provided.

Beginning of the interview: Researcher provides the definition of alternatives to suspension included in the study.

Questions:

1. Briefly share your background and experience as an educator and administrator including your time as an administrator in urban high schools.

2. Tell me about your experiences using alternatives to suspension.

    a. How long have you used alternatives to suspension?

    b. Describe your training or professional learning in using alternatives to suspension.

    c. Are there any specific alternatives to suspension that you prefer to use?

    d. Describe the reasons you prefer specific alternatives to suspension.

3. What are your perceptions of using alternatives to suspension?

    a. What is the perception of the faculty and staff on alternatives to suspension?

    b. How have the students responded to alternatives to suspension?

   c. How have parents, guardians, and families reacted to alternatives to suspension?

4. How have you used alternatives to suspension along with discipline in your school?

5. How are alternatives to suspension used with major discipline refractions in your school?

   a. Has this had an impact on the number of days students are suspended?

6. Do you use any other alternatives to suspension in your discipline process in your school?

7. Are there any restrictions when you use alternatives to suspension or any special considerations for special student populations?

8. What are the barriers to using alternatives to suspension in your school?

9. What assists the use of alternatives to suspension in your building?

10. Do you have any suggestions on implementing alternatives to suspension in an urban high school?

11. Concluding the interview: Do you have any additional thoughts or considerations as we close the interview?

Thank you for your time today. As a reminder, I will send you the summary of our conversation and ask you to review and let me know if there is any clarification needed to any responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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[1] Please note: Interviews will be semi-structured, meaning these questions may not be asked verbatim and conversation will be allowed to flow in a friendly style. The investigator will be led by the subject into areas that might not be touched upon here, but that will remain within bounds of minimal risk.

Appendix B: Interview Question Matrix

Interview Question Matrix

Essential Research or Supporting Question	Associated Interview Question
EQ: How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools understand alternatives to suspension?	How are alternatives to suspension used with major discipline refractions in your school? Tell me about your experiences using alternatives to suspension. What are your perceptions of using alternatives to suspension?
SQ1: How do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools utilize alternatives to suspension?	How have you used alternatives to suspension along with discipline in your school? What are the barriers to using alternatives to suspension in your school? What assists the use of alternatives to suspension in your building?
SQ2: Which alternatives to	Do you have any suggestions on implementing alternatives to suspension in an urban high school?

suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools perceive to be successful?	Tell me about your experiences using alternatives to suspension. How have you used alternatives to suspension along with discipline in your school?
SQ3: What alternatives to suspension do high school administrators in Virginia urban public schools use the most?	What are your perceptions of using alternatives to suspension? Are there any specific alternatives to suspension that you prefer to use? Describe the reasons you prefer specific alternatives to suspension.

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