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Administrator Perceptions of Student Drug Use

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Eva Isett

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Administrator Perceptions of Student Drug Use

by

Eva Isett

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

This study sought to understand the varied disciplinary responses and perceptions regarding student drug use. Students caught under the influence or actively using drugs on high school campuses are often suspended and face possible expulsion. Given the racial disproportionalities in student discipline and the adverse academic and life outcomes for suspended students, this study investigated high school administrators' perceptions of student drug offenses and their beliefs about discipline for drug-related offenses. The research findings revealed two significant views on effective disciplinary responses. Some administrators viewed suspensions as an effective deterrent, but others believed that schools should instead help students understand why they use drugs to support them in stopping. Additionally, administrators who shifted their beliefs from punitive to restorative credited district support and getting to know drug-offending students' stories better. All administrators believed in the use of restorative practices and

emphasized relationships. However, there was a disconnect between beliefs and practices for those who administered suspensions for student drug use despite believing in restorative practices. Recommendations include reframing student drug use as a health concern rather than bad behavior and providing training on the effective use of restorative practices.

The dissertation of Eva Isett is approved.

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2023

DEDICATION

To my family for your unwavering love, support, and encouragement.

Los quiero con todo mi corazón.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced that school suspensions and expulsions exacerbated academic struggles (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) found that in the state of California, 400,000 students were suspended out-of-school at least one time during the 2009–2010 school year (Heilbrun et al., 2015). That is enough students to fill every seat in all the professional baseball and football stadiums in the state. More recently, the OCR reported that in the 2017–2018 school year 2.7 million American students were disciplined with one or more out-of-school suspension (Heilbrun et al., 2018). Although some supporters of out-of-school suspensions may argue that they serve as deterrents, research has consistently shown that such suspensions are strongly associated with low achievement, a heightened risk for dropping out, and a greater likelihood of juvenile justice involvement. Skiba et al. (2014) correlated out-of-school suspension and expulsion as risk factors for a wide range of negative outcomes. If deterrence is the ultimate goal, suspensions have the opposite effect and, in fact, place students within the school-to-prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003). The prison pipeline describes the relationship between discipline policies and increased contact with the juvenile justice system.

Although the reasons students are suspended vary from defiance, fighting, harassment, bullying, and so forth, possession of drugs or under the influence of drugs are two infractions that stand out. These two infractions stand out because they are about the student self-harming, medicating, and or soothing, and thus, suggest a need to reconsider disciplinary approaches. Students who self-medicate generally struggle in other areas as well. According to the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), which is a comprehensive student data collection system that addresses school climate, health risks and behaviors, and youth resiliency, in 2019, 15% of ninth

graders and 23% of 11th graders reported current alcohol or drug use in the previous 30 days (CHKS, 2019). The aim of this study was to understand administrators' perceptions of school drug offenses as well as the ways they believe drug offenses should be addressed. Because administrators serve as the disciplinary authorities in schools, they can develop ways of addressing students in less punitive ways by understanding their own perceptions of drug offenses. Given the harmful effects of suspensions and the high rates of reported drug use by students, examining administrators' perceptions could help shed light on the critical approaches needed to shift the current punitive ones.

Statement of the Problem

Teen Drug Use

Teen drug use is an issue that many schools must address. In 2009 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that 21.7% of high school adolescents reported smoking marijuana, and 29.2% reported drinking alcohol (CDC, 2020). At the time of this study, according to the *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, 19.8% of students in Grades 9–12 reported using marijuana at least one time during the previous 30 days (de Brey et al., 2021). Furthermore, the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2020) highlighted approximately one in three students reported current alcohol use, one in five reported current marijuana use, and one in seven reported current binge drinking. Several studies suggest that adolescents are at high risk for illicit drug use (Staff et al., 2010). Given that marijuana and other drug use is a suspendible offense in most school districts, this would mean that if caught under the influence or with marijuana paraphernalia, roughly 20% to 47% of U.S. students could be suspended from school.

Suspensions

Suspension research has grown in importance as more light is shed on the negative impacts of missing school. Provided that drug-related activities often result in suspensions, it is important to underscore their impact. Suspensions pose a wide range of adverse outcomes for students; however, the consequences of missing school are exacerbated for students who are already struggling academically or receive special education services. Additionally, disparate academic outcomes for Black children compared to their peers from other ethnic groups are problematic and persistent (Howard, 2016). Attendance Works, a federal agency aimed at lowering chronic absenteeism, demonstrated in a 2013 state-by-state analysis of national testing data that students who miss more school than their peers consistently score lower on standardized tests, a result that holds true at every age, in every demographic group, and in every state and city tested (Attendance Works, 2014). Given that in most states, 10 or more absences is considered chronic absenteeism paired with the fact that suspension dates can range between 1 and 5 days, students missing class as a result of being suspended is detrimental to their academic success. Although proponents and supporters of suspension provide varying reasons for why suspensions are a good option to correct behavior, suspensions rarely if ever center a focused approach to supporting the offending student (Hochman & Worner, 1987). In other words, once the student returns to school from suspension, there is not a uniform attempt to reintegrate the student into the school community. The student is often alienated from their peers, feels shame, and is more likely to be suspended again (Theriot et al., 2010).

Adult negative perceptions of how drug offenses should be handled could potentially limit more restorative approaches to the handling of student drug offenses. Restorative approaches focus on the rehabilitation of students who get caught with drugs or who are under

the influence of drugs. They are usually ashamed and use drugs as a way to self-medicate (J. H. Brown & Clarey, 2012). Student use of drugs in schools is usually sequential in order. Students typically begin with beer and alcohol, move on to cigarettes and hard liquor, and then progress onto marijuana (Kandel & Faust, 1975). Given the frequency of drug use among teenagers, an alternative approach to support students exhibiting drug abuse behaviors is warranted and traditional means of correction should be reexamined.

Existing studies have examined the usefulness of suspensions in deterring behavior, and in many cases, suspensions have been shown to be less effective for students with specific behavioral challenges and problems (Chin et al., 2012). Some scholars argue that suspending may be inappropriate and ineffective to promote learning or behavioral compliance (Chin et al., 2012). Out-of-school suspensions are linked to higher drop-out rates (Hemphill & Schneider, 2013). Furthermore, students suspended for drug use are more likely to continue drug use while suspended (T. M. Brown, 2007; Chin et al., 2012; Christie et al., 2004; Clark, 2009; Lasser & Schmidt, 2009; Michail, 2011). Considering the relationship between suspensions, drug use, and dropout rates, there is a great need to examine alternative ways of disciplining and supporting students for school drug use. Potentially, one of the many barriers limiting a different approach to drug offenses and suspensions lies in the perceptions adults have for how drug offenses should be handled. For instance, some administrators may approach student drug use as an egregious offense and might suspend the student for a maximum of 5 days whereas another administrator might approach the offense as typical teenage behavior and simply log in the offense, call the student's parents, and send them home for the day to sober up. The range in administrator disciplinary views and approaches warrants a more systematic analysis.

To proponents and supporters of suspension, the suspension is seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning process in school. A student commits an infraction and must therefore accept the consequences. According to supporters, like any other disciplinary measure, suspensions may help reduce the chances of recurrence of misbehavior for a short period of time immediately after the suspension (Wu et al., 1982). Wu et al. (1982) argued that to supporters of this disciplinary practice, suspensions may also serve as a deterrent, an example used for other students not to commit the kind of behavior for which suspension is imposed. In addition, the proponents of suspension have also viewed suspension as needed sometimes to get parents involved in situations in which they have not previously cooperated with the school in its efforts to solve the behavioral problems of their children (Wu et al., 1982). More philosophically, the proponents have argued that the majority of the students who are interested in learning should not have to suffer from the constant disruption of the very few (Garibaldi, 1979; Schmidt, 1982; U.S. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, 1976). Several studies suggest that Black students are at greater risk for being suspended and negatively impacted. In his poignant analysis of the state of Black males within America's educational system, Howard (2008) detailed how Black males are systematically excluded from American schools and streamlined into American prisons. Suspensions often serve as the gateway for the school-to-prison pipeline (Howard, 2008). Considering that suspended youth have worse adult outcomes than nonsuspended youth, such as less likelihood of earning a high school diploma or bachelor's degree and as more likely to have been arrested or on probation (Rosenbaum, 2020), it is important to examine alternative ways of supporting youth experimenting and or struggling with drugs.

Narrowing the Problem

In school districts throughout the United States, Black, Latino, and American Indian students are subject to the disproportionate rate of school disciplinary sanctions, ranging from office disciplinary referrals to corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion (Krezmien et al., 2006; Wallace et al., 2008). The intent of disciplining students is to maintain order and safety by removing students who break school rules and disrupt the school learning environment and to make an example to other students. Schools tend to rely heavily on exclusion from the classroom as the primary discipline strategy (Arcia, 2006), and this practice often has a disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx students. The use of school exclusion as a discipline practice may be a contributing factor to the racial gaps in academic achievement. Thus, discussions about discipline gaps must be had when issues of opportunity gaps are addressed.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

One common approach for disciplining students caught with drugs or under the influence is zero tolerance. Zero tolerance refers to punitive disciplinary practices that emerged from the War on Drugs as well as the 1994 Gun-free Schools legislation (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). These strict disciplinary school policies were a response to perceived increased threats of school violence and drug use in schools. As a result of these heightened threats, schools responded with more punitive consequences that led to higher suspension and expulsion rates for accused students. One of the unintended consequences of zero-tolerance policies, however, was an increase in the criminalization of students of color. Educational scholars attribute the nation's high levels of suspension and expulsion (Potts et al., 2003; Skiba & Noam, 2001) and the disproportionate impact on Black students to draconian zero-tolerance policies (Atkinson, 2005; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006).

As inequitable disciplinary policies became more evident, alternative approaches such as restorative justice practices began to surface. Restorative practices were a direct response to harsh punitive policies because they seek to restore harmony for both the victim and those who caused harm (Anfara & Evans, 2013). Unfortunately, although restorative justice practices are becoming more common, they are still not widely used in schools with proportionally more Black students (Payne & Welch, 2015). Drug infractions in schools continue to be met with suspensions and or expulsions.

Existing Gaps in the Research

Considerable research has been done on the adverse effects of zero-tolerance policies, but little to no research has been done on suspensions specifically for drug-related offenses. A review of the current literature suggests that there are few recent studies that specifically research adolescent drug use and school response. A 2001 School Health Policies and Program Study (SHPPS) was an empirical study on school districts around the United States that found that 75% of schools “Almost Always or Always” refer students accused of illegal drug use to legal authorities (Small et al., 2001, p. 332). Additionally, the 2001 study found that 83.1% of schools adopted a zero-tolerance policy for alcohol use and 95.8% for illegal drug use. The study also found that one in five schools “almost always or always” reassign offending students to alternative high schools for using illegal drugs (Small et al., 2001). Additionally, a 2004 empirical international study reviewed school policies on tobacco, alcohol, and other illicit drugs in various Western countries and their effectiveness in preventing drug use. The study found that the typical response to alcohol and other drug violations was suspension, counselor referral and encouragement to participate in a student support system (Evans-Whipp et al., 2004). Other research on teen drug use has centered on the dangers of marijuana as a gateway drug (Kandel &

Faust, 1975). Most previous studies have relied on quantifying drug offenses and their consequences; however, no studies exist on administrators' perceptions of student drug offenses. Considering the critical role school administrators play in handling disciplinary matters, understanding their perceptions is an essential first step.

A closer look at the literature on overall suspensions reveals a number of gaps and shortcomings because they do not specifically address drug offenses or high school administrators' perceptions on drug offenses. This topic has not previously been addressed because suspensions are often analyzed in relation to other suspendible offenses such as smoking, weapons possession, or fighting. Most studies have relied on overall suspension data, but much could be learned from disaggregating suspension data as they relate specifically to drug offenses and the perceptions adults have of how they should be addressed. Administrators' power and influence over disciplinary matters cannot be understated. Fenning et al.'s 2008 survey of 64 Illinois high schools and their administrators found that 37% reported handling discipline matters either frequently or daily. The second part of the study analyzed the top 64 codes of conduct most often used to take disciplinary action and found that most actions emphasized suspension and were punitive in nature (Fenning et al., 2008). Studies on administrators' and teachers' perceptions on zero tolerance have shed light on the importance of how perception is linked to school disciplinary practices (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Huang & Cornell, 2021). To address this gap in the literature, I am interested in examining administrators' perceptions of student drug use. Their disciplinary response is an important first step in creating more supportive approaches for students being disciplined for drug use.

Given that society's views on drug use and abuse are evolving, I am interested in disciplinary practices for student drug use and alternative, student-centered approaches to support students who are dealing with addiction.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand administrators' perceptions concerning drug offenses because they typically handle disciplinary consequences for students suspected of being under the influence and or drug possession. My research focused on their perceptions of the appropriate disciplinary actions that should be taken for students accused of drug infractions, including restorative justice approaches for drug offenses.

Research Questions

1. What are high school administrators' perceptions of drug offenses, and how do those perceptions influence their beliefs about discipline for drug-related offenses in their schools?
2. What are high school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of restorative approaches to drug offenses?

Study Design

My research study was qualitative. The phenomenon I was interested in studying was administrators' perceptions concerning high school student drug offenses. A qualitative study enabled me to ask detailed questions that helped me uncover their perceptions and disciplinary responses to student drug use. My research consisted of 10 in-depth, 1-hr administrator interviews. These interviews explored perceptions of student drug use as well as the perceived ways students should be disciplined for drug offenses. I conducted my research in a large suburban school district in Southern California. Participants were recruited through an email list

of high school administrators who included principals and assistant principals. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Study Significance

My research is significant because American society is slowly changing the way it views addiction. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s drug addiction was strictly viewed as a punishable offense, society's overall opinion of marijuana drug use is changing (Galston & Dionne, 2013). The K-12 public school system grapples with where and how drugs fall into austere zero-tolerance policies and has been slow to adopt more restorative practices. When racial disproportionality is factored into suspension rates, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the poorer outcomes for students with suspensions, it is imperative to examine how administrators' perceptions of disciplinary practices regarding drug offenses should be handled. My research aimed to shed light on alternative ways of addressing drug-related offenses. Additionally, although important research has been done on the harmful effects of zero-tolerance policies and the use of restorative practices, very little research exists on administrators' perceptions of disciplinary practices for student drug use and alternative ways of supporting students struggling with drug use.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to understand administrators' perceptions concerning drug offenses because they typically handle disciplinary consequences for students suspected of being under the influence and or drug possession. In this literature review, I first examine the genesis of zero-tolerance policies in schools and the disproportionality in their application to highlight their harmful effects. Next, I discuss how zero-tolerance policies lead to counterproductive behaviors in youth and often lead to more delinquent behaviors. I focused on zero-tolerance policies because previous studies examining high and or disproportionate rates of suspension can be traced back to the inception of zero-tolerance policies. Moreover, although research on zero tolerance has illuminated gender, racial, and varying ability disparities, limited studies to date have examined high school administrators' perception of student drug use and their disciplinary response. As a result, this literature review investigates teachers' and administrators' perceptions of zero-tolerance policies to uncover relationships between heavy reliance on punitive measures and support for zero-tolerance policies. Last, I analyze restorative justice practices and how they can serve as an alternative approach to austere zero-tolerance disciplinary consequences. I also discuss how restorative justice policies served as the conceptual framework for my research.

Zero Tolerance and Suspensions

The disproportionality in school suspension rates for Black and Latinx students is alarming and sets students on a possible path of delinquency. Inflaming the discipline gap are zero-tolerance policies that call for mandatory sanctions for student disciplinary infractions without regard for the severity of the misconduct (American Psychological Association [APA] Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Many states and school systems have expanded on zero tolerance for guns to include other infractions, including drugs, alcohol, and aggressive behavior

(Fabelo et al., 2011). Zero tolerance operates under two core assumptions: (a) sanctions will deter student misconduct and (b) removal of serious offenders from the school will improve the school climate (Skiba et al., 2011). Yet research suggests the opposite is true: the APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance (2008) concluded that there was no evidence to support the efficacy of zero tolerance as a disciplinary policy. Longitudinal studies showed that students who were suspended once were more likely to be suspended again, suggesting that first-time suspension is associated with continued misbehavior and further suspensions with no evidence of it being a deterrent or having a remedial effect (Fabelo et al., 2011; Tobin et al., 2000). Restorative disciplinary practices aim to restore order, correct behavior, and reintegrate the offender back into their community. Restorative disciplinary practices, unlike suspension, provide a more comprehensive approach to dealing with negative behaviors. Given that nearly one third of U.S. students are suspended over a K-12 school career and suffer worse adult outcomes than nonsuspended students, it is important to delve deep into alternative ways of disciplining students (Rosenbaum, 2018). Rosenbaum's (2018) study compared the educational and criminal justice outcomes of 480 youth suspended for the first time with those of 1,193 matched nonsuspended youth from a nationally representative sample and examined their outcomes 12 years later. The study revealed that suspended youth were less likely to have earned bachelor's degrees or high school diplomas, and were more likely to have been arrested and on probation (Rosenbaum, 2018).

Origin of Zero Tolerance in Schools

Zero-tolerance policies in schools can be traced back to the 1980s "war on drugs," whereby states and the federal government desperately attempted to combat the use and sales of drugs. Not long after its introduction, zero tolerance was used in various settings where rules and

or laws may have been broken (Teske, 2011). Teske (2011) argued that widespread application to minor offenses can be attributed to the “Broken Windows” theory of crime (Kelling & Coles, 1997). The broken windows theory argues that communities should get tough on minor offenses and clean up neighborhoods to deter more serious crimes, thus making it necessary to punish minor offense violators (Teske, 2011). Similarly, widespread perceptions of increased crime and violence led schools to respond with harsher disciplinary sanctions to minor offenses (Weingarten, 2015). Furthermore, the perception of student criminality was exacerbated with the introduction of the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, which required states to receive federal funding to expel any student for at least a year for bringing a firearm into school (Skiba et al., 2011). Many states and school systems expanded the principle of zero tolerance for guns to include a variety of other infractions, including drugs, alcohol, and aggressive behavior (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Zero-tolerance policies were adopted in schools because they were seen as a way to deter student misconduct and improve the school climate (Heilbrun et al., 2015). The belief is that offending students will think twice before committing an infraction when the offenders weigh the possible consequences or they can be used as an example to others. Furthermore, by removing the most serious offenders, schools can improve their safety and climate. Beliefs that schools could suspend their way to improve school climate were popularized and used extensively in American schools. In 1974, approximately 1.7 million (3.7% of all students) were suspended from school, and by 2006, that number had risen to more than 3.3 million, or 6.8%, of all students (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], Office for Civil Rights, 2004).

Racial Disparities in Zero-Tolerance Policies

The 1.6 million student increase in suspensions from 1974 to 2006 obscures an important layer to zero-tolerance policies. Racial disparities and uneven application of draconian rules led to certain groups being more severely punished (Heilbrun et al., 2015). Black male students have disproportionately been impacted by zero-tolerance policies (Wald & Losen, 2003). Black students are more likely than White students and other racial minorities to be suspended for relatively minor disciplinary infractions and incur more severe punishments for minor infractions (Howard, 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Petras et al., 2011). Skiba et al. (2016) found that out-of-school suspension and expulsion continue to be used inequitably by race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation. They highlighted that disparities cannot be explained by different rates of misbehavior or poverty, and school disciplinary exclusion is often the first step leading to short- and long-term negative academic and social consequences. These negative consequences can have lifelong consequences for students, particularly marginalized students (Skiba et al., 2016). The racial gaps persist when poverty and other demographic variables are accounted for (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Anyon et al. (2021) examined racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions in a large Western school district and found that Black students were 4.9 times more likely to be suspended than White students. For Native American and Latinx students, the numbers were 4.1 and 2.7, respectively. Given that in 2010 Black men represented 7% of the nation's overall population yet represented 37% of incarcerated men, it is important to examine how school suspension contributes to this alarming trend (Howard, 2013). Racial disparities were so alarming that in 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice and USDOE Office for Civil Rights, issued a "Dear Colleague" letter to state departments of education and local school districts advising that racial disparities in school discipline constitute violations of federal

antidiscrimination laws. The letter urged schools to take immediate steps to prevent and reduce differences in treatment by race. The letter warned that discriminatory discipline practices on the basis of race, color, or national origin can constitute a violation of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Zhang et al., 2015), prohibiting racial discrimination in schools. The letter noted that disproportionalities in suspension rates could not be explained by student behavior and begin implementing disciplinary practices that are not racially discriminatory (Heilbrun et al., 2015).

Harmful Effects of Zero Tolerance

School is a protective factor against delinquent behaviors (Satcher, 2001), which is why removing students from school for common teenage behaviors is counterproductive. Besides being counterproductive, suspension increases the risk of antisocial and delinquent conduct (Skiba et al., 2016). Zero-tolerance policies apply sanctions across the board regardless of the risk level of the student (Teske, 2011) Studies have found that disciplining harshly with out-of-school suspensions and criminal punishments regardless of the risk level of the student worsens the problem by making students more likely to reoffend (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Raffaele Mendez, 2003). A series of longitudinal studies on the disciplining of elementary and middle school students found that out-of-school suspensions is a predictor of future suspensions (Mendez, 2003). The study also found that out-of-school suspensions contribute to poor academic performance and lower graduation rates. Skiba et al. (2006) characterized zero-tolerance policies as “philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (p. 3). Thus, zero tolerance’s promise of deterring negative behaviors and improving school climate falls short and, in many cases, worsens the very problems it seeks to remedy (Teske, 2015).

Teacher Perceptions of Zero-Tolerance Policies, Suspensions, and School Safety

Zero-tolerance policies, although well intended, have had a harmful impact on students. A series of studies have indicated that schools that are more intentional about their disciplinary policies and their impact have lower racial and disciplinary gaps (Mayworm et al., 2021). Gregory and Cornell (2009) coined the term “authoritative school climate,” which is a discipline style that integrates firm and consistent enforcement of rules with warmth and responsiveness to students’ individual needs and is generally associated with positive outcomes (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Research findings have suggested that schools in which students and teachers perceived school rules as strict but fair and perceived the teachers as supportive have lower suspension rates (Heilbrun et al., 2018). Schools identified as authoritative include teachers who perceive school rules to be strict but fair toward students. They believe students should be held accountable for their actions while understanding their role in helping to support struggling students. Teacher perceptions on school climate and behavior play an important role in how teachers feel students should be disciplined.

Despite widespread criticism, zero-tolerance policies are widely used and applied in school settings. A 2021 empirical study conducted by Huang and Cornell examined 10,990 teacher surveys in Virginia middle schools and found that 74% of teachers supported the use of zero tolerance as an effective discipline practice (Huang & Cornell, 2021). The study also revealed an association between teachers’ increased support for zero-tolerance policies; increased out-of-school suspension rates, and lower feelings of safety. The implications of this empirical study have impressed upon educators, administrators, and policymakers the need to address perceptions and beliefs about zero-tolerance policies. The literature pertaining to zero-tolerance policies strongly suggests that such policies do not help foster a sense of safety and

security among teachers but can instead heighten unsafe feelings. Huang and Cornell's (2021) findings are similar to the APA's Zero-Tolerance Taskforce, who in 2008, could find no scientific evidence that zero-tolerance improved school climate or school safety (APA Zero-Tolerance Taskforce, 2008) The APA Taskforce noted that widespread use of zero-tolerance policies encouraged harsh disciplinary practices for even minor offenses.

Huang and Cornell's (2021) empirical study found that 40% of school administrators favored zero-tolerance disciplinary practices compared to the teachers' 74% favorability. Although studies on principals' support of zero-tolerance policies have been linked with higher rates of suspension (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Skiba & Edl, 2004), very limited studies have been done on teachers' perceptions of zero-tolerance policies and the impact on student disciplinary consequences. Huang and Anyon (2020) noted,

Teacher support for zero tolerance is critical because teachers play a central role in school discipline, identifying student misbehavior, deciding that the observed infraction is serious, and referring the student to the office. Arguably, teacher support for zero tolerance is more relevant to understanding discipline practices than whether the school policy makes explicit reference to zero tolerance. (p. 216)

Fries and DeMitchell (2007) made a similar argument by noting that although school administrators have the power to decide on the consequences enacted on a student referred to the office for "sentencing," it is often the teacher on the front line who identifies, intervenes, and ultimately decides whose behavior gets referred to administration.

Huang and Cornell (2021) highlighted the importance of addressing teacher perceptions and understanding of zero-tolerance policies. Restorative approaches to discipline centering on inclusion and positive reinforcement will not thrive if teachers remain invested in zero-tolerance

policies. Gregory and Evans (2020) examined how efforts to implement restorative justice approaches have “stumbled” at many schools. Huang and Anyon (2020) argued that

it is important to examine the extent of support for zero tolerance and to demonstrate whether it is positively or negatively associated with disciplinary outcomes and school safety. (p. 216)

Taking into account teachers’ perceptions about discipline is important when seeking to change mindsets about less punitive practices. For example, school leaders who aim to implement restorative practices must first begin by educating staff, students, parents, and the community about the harmful effects of zero-tolerance policies and presenting the lack of data to support that such policies serve as a deterrent or make people feel safer. Only by addressing preconceived notions of effective disciplinary practices can administrators effectively implement restorative, inclusive disciplinary practices.

Administrator Perceptions of Zero-Tolerance Policies, Suspensions, and School Safety

There have been numerous studies to investigate the role of the principal in setting the climate of the school and how disciplinary practices are implemented. Previous research has emphasized that school variations in discipline cannot be fully explained by differences in how the students act and may actually be caused by the differences in principal perceptions regarding suspensions and expulsions as disciplinary practices (Skiba et al., 2007; Wu et al., 1982). A 2007 study conducted by Skiba et al. examined 325 Indiana high school principals’ perceptions of zero-tolerance policies across the state. Skiba’s study concluded that principals who closely aligned themselves with the belief that zero-tolerance policies served as deterrents were more likely to have higher suspension rates. Principals who aligned themselves with more preventative measures of dealing with discipline did not believe suspensions would improve school climate

and had significantly lower suspension rates (Skiba, 2007). A further question to explore and build on Skiba's findings is whether principals' attitudes about zero-tolerance policies adjust and/or change when addressing student drug offenses.

Heilbrun et al. (2015) built on Skiba's 2007 study by examining 100% of Virginia's 306 high school principals' support of zero-tolerance policies. The study was part of the Virginia School Safety Audit, a state-mandated survey administered annually online by the Virginia Center for School Safety of the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. Heilbrun et al. concluded that principals who adhered to zero-tolerance disciplinary measures had higher suspension rates. Additionally, their research findings uncovered that suspension rates for Black students were more than double that of White students—a finding that is consistent with research in other states (Fabelo et al., 2011; Heilbrun et al., 2015; Losen & Skiba 2010). The power and influence of school administrators' attitudes and perceptions cannot be underestimated and warrants further examination, especially as educators consider the intersection of race and harmful disciplinary policies.

Additionally, Dunbar and Villarruel's (2002) examination of urban leaders' implementation of zero-tolerance policies uncovered a disparate interpretation of the zero-tolerance policies and how their implementation negatively affects the educational experience of students, particularly Black and Latinx students attending urban schools. Their study's focus highlighted some of the many discrepancies that arise when school administrators are called to implement zero-tolerance policies. They highlighted the drastically different interpretation and implementation of zero-tolerance policies at a Michigan School Board expulsions presentation in 2002. Through this presentation, they shared a rural principal's response to a student who was known to have his hunting rifle in his vehicle at school. The principal discreetly asked the

student to take his truck back home and leave his rifle at home. Conversely, Dunbar and Villarruel highlighted how a Black student in an urban Michigan school's beeper went off, which set off a search of his vehicle where a shotgun was discovered, and the student was subsequently charged with gun possession and faced a prison sentence (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002). The dramatic difference in each of the principal's approaches to nearly identical scenarios is an example of the need to reexamine and perhaps invalidate the longstanding belief that certain offenses are treated the same under zero-tolerance policies and practices.

Beckham's (2009) study on administrator perceptions of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies concluded that urban Ohio administrators perceived schools were safer as a result of zero-tolerance policies and were evenly split on whether such policies served as a deterrent for their students. Martinez (2009) asserted that advocates of zero-tolerance believe that the policy is used solely for students who display the most severe behaviors and who threaten the safety of the school staff and students but is often applied to students who previously have not demonstrated behavioral problems. Martinez highlighted egregious examples of the misapplication of zero tolerance, and consequences ranged from suspending students who brought a water gun to school, used a plastic knife to cut chicken during lunch, and possessed Midol, among others. Martinez warned that administrators' discretion and overuse of school suspensions denies students the opportunity to receive an education. Gregory and Cornell (2009) argued that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are inconsistent with adolescent developmental needs (Gregory, Cornell, et al., 2010). Moreover, although research has illuminated a deeper understanding of the harmful and inequitable implementation of zero-tolerance policies, no study to date has specifically examined school administrators' perceptions of school drug offenses.

Adolescent Drug Use: A Health Concern

Although some may argue that teenage drug use should be met with swift disciplinary consequences, some health experts assert that teenage drug use should be treated as a health concern. Adolescent use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana can cause irreversible damage to the structure and functioning of the adolescent brain, which can cause permanent difficulties with behavioral regulation and executive functioning (Ashtari et al. 2011; Dwyer et al. 2009; Ewing et al. 2014; Jacobus et al. 2009; Lisdahl et al. 2013; Wilson et al., 2000). Jongenelis et al. revealed in their 2019 study of 1,661 15- to 17-year-olds that 20.3% had used at least one of the following substances—alcohol, marijuana, or tobacco—6.7% reported using two or more, and 3.3% reported using all three. Use of multiple drugs has been linked to various negative outcomes for teens including physical health issues, risky sexual behaviors, school dropout, poor academic achievement, psychological anguish, legal problems, physical health struggles, and depressive symptoms (Bohnert et al., 2014; Connell et al., 2009; Fallu et al. 2014; Felton et al., 2015; Kelly, Chan, et al., 2015; Kelly, Evans-Whipp, et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2012). Considering the harmful and lasting implications of teenage drug use, further study of how schools can better support self-medicating students is needed.

Several recent studies suggest that adolescent drug use of alcohol and tobacco is linked to major depressive disorder. These studies maintain that teens use drugs as a way to self-medicate to relieve and manage psychological stressors, particularly those associated with depressive disorders (Grigsby et al., 2016; Stapinski et al., 2016). Given some of the reasons students choose to self-medicate, school administrators should be equipped with proper training on alternative ways to respond to student drug use. Because suspensions pose a wide array of negative outcomes for students (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Weingarten, 2015), students who are self-

medicating to cope with life's stressors are even more vulnerable when facing harsh disciplinary practices. Understanding why adolescents resort to drug use is important for educators interested in finding effective ways of curbing teen drug use. A Canadian study of 1360 seventh and eighth graders found early adolescent drug use was linked to self-reported mental health struggles (Brownlie et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies on LGBTQIA+ youth and suicide have found a link between depression, adolescent drug use, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts (Hatchel et al., 2019). Studies have illuminated LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk for worrisome drug use when compared to their non-LGBTQ peers (Hatchel et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2012). A more thorough understanding of the reasons some teenagers resort to drug use is needed to better support them in our schools, particularly those at higher risk for self-harm. Empirical studies in adults have found a link between suicide, alcohol, and drug use disorders (Wilcox et al., 2004). Because for many, drug use begins in the adolescent years, it is imperative for educators to be well versed on the implications of teenage drug use. Given that administrators are the first line of defense, it is of utmost importance they are armed with information on ways to fully support struggling students.

The brain undergoes critical developmental processes during adolescence. Drug use can have a negative effect on neurobiological development. Teenage drug use has been labeled a major health concern because of how it predicts or relates to drug using behavior later in life. Perhaps even more alarming is that deficits in learning and memory following adolescent drug use endure into adulthood well after drug exposure has subsided (Mooney-Leber & Gould, 2018). Reframing the way educators and administrators specifically view drug use from a behavior that can be changed through suspension to a student's cry for help can reframe conversations regarding student drug use and administrator responses.

What Is Restorative Justice?

Previous research has defined restorative justice (RJ) as when people impacted by a crime, infraction, and transgression share space to address how each party was affected by the act and ways to repair the harm (Coates et al., 2003; Gal & Moyal, 2011; McGarrell & Hipple, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). All parties involved discuss the occurrence and collectively decide how to repair the harm and broken trust. Zehr (2002) defined RJ as a humanist philosophical approach to making amends after harm is done, and argued that RJ is rooted in respect. RJ prioritizes social engagement over social control. According to Morrison and Vaandering (2012), “Behavior is understood in a social context, individuals are recognized as being part of complex relations, and building, maintaining, and repairing relationships become priorities” (p. 139). Although the exact genesis of RJ is unknown, RJ scholars trace its origins in the premodern native cultures of the South Pacific and Americas. These cultures had a varied approach to addressing conflict within their tribe. For tribal culture, the tenets of managing harm are offenders’ accountability for the damage they caused along with a plan for repairing the hurt and restoring the offender to be reinstated back into the community (Fronius et al., 2019). RJ practices center on strengthening community engagement by promoting connections with the community. This approach is vastly different because it views student misbehavior as unmet biopsychosocial needs (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al. 2019; Gwathney, 2021). Thus, adapting RJ practices and policies in schools means moving away from punitive suspension policies and offering more inclusive disciplinary practices that consider the root cause of the misbehavior.

Restorative Justice in Schools

Restorative practices seek to protect student offenders by keeping them in school (Karp & Breslin, 2001). By not suspending students, administrators ensure that their academic and

emotional well-being is protected. RJ disciplinary actions take into account the offending student's physiological, social, and emotional needs (Gwathney, 2021). A restorative approach considers the root causes of the harm done and allows the student to unpack the wrongdoing, its impact, and the necessary steps needed to repair the harm rather than simply punishing the student (Kline, 2016).

RJ practices provide students access to individualized approaches that consider unique circumstances in determining disciplinary consequences (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Simson, 2014). RJ as a disciplinary practice focuses on healing and reintegration and operates under the assumption that students respond better when they are involved in the decisions that affect them directly. RJ emphasizes the importance of working with students rather than doing things to or for them. Additionally, RJ is a more positive, less punitive approach to repairing harm with an emphasis on fair process, restoring relationships, and resolution through reparation (McCluskey et al., 2008).

Restorative practices in school settings can be categorized into two: preventative operationalized methods for preventing disciplinary infractions and the set of procedures used after an infraction is committed. In the preventative phase, restorative approaches focus on the ethos of care and social-emotional learning, and the latter encompasses a set of procedures that occur after a rule infraction (Gregory et al., 2014). Given the racial disproportionality in suspension rates for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students, some states have adopted programs and training grounded in RJ (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For example, the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) purposefully seeks to transform how students and adults interact with one another in an effort to improve school climate and culture. IIRP's Restorative Practices focuses on prevention and intervention (Lewis, 2009). Successful program

implementation takes time and commitment from all stakeholders to ensure success. Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2020) empirical summary of available RJ quantitative data published between January 1999 and December 2019 concluded that initial evidence can cause improvements in school climate, behavior, discipline, and discipline disparities.

Conceptual Frameworks

My study was guided by RJ and behaviorism as theoretical lenses for understanding administrators' perceptions of student drug use as well as their perceptions of necessary disciplinary consequences. As previously mentioned, RJ reflects a humanist philosophical approach to making amends after harm is done (Zehr, 2002). Zehr's (2002) arguments guided my questioning as I sought to uncover the ways administrators discipline students caught under the influence of drugs and or caught in possession of paraphernalia. RJ is a framework based on the idea that all humans are hardwired for connection. Restorative practices emphasize how to strengthen relationships between individuals and repair harm done rather than punishing the offender (IIRP, n.d.). The tenets of RP are inclusion, bringing affected parties together, making amends, and reintegrating students into the classroom community.

I also employed B. F. Skinner's (1963) and John B. Watson's (2017) behaviorist theory as a theoretical framework. A behaviorist lens is critical in understanding administrators' perceptions because suspensions as a disciplinary consequence are steeped in behaviorist ideals. The two major developers of the behaviorist school of thought sought to prove that behavior could be predicted and controlled (Skinner, 2011). They studied how learning is affected by changes in the environment. For example, Skinner and Watson asserted that if the consequences to an action are bad, the action will not be repeated.

These ideas guided the development of my interview protocol as well as my analysis. I asked administrators questions related to their perceptions of students caught under the influence and or in possession of drugs as well as their perceptions of how students should be disciplined. Given that administrators often have discretion for how they respond, it is important to understand how they negotiate their responses to drug offenses.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand administrators' perceptions concerning drug offenses because they typically handle disciplinary consequences for students suspected of being under the influence and or drug possession. As drugs such as marijuana become more readily available and societal views regarding addiction become less punitive, I was interested in examining how administrators' views might influence discipline issues regarding school drug offenses. Although suspensions, disproportionalities regarding suspensions, and zero-tolerance policies have been studied extensively, research on educators' perceptions of drug offenses is limited. The following research questions guided the study.

Research Questions

1. What are high school administrators' perceptions of drug offenses, and how do those perceptions influence their beliefs about discipline for drug-related offenses in their schools?
2. What are high school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of restorative approaches to drug offenses?

Research Design and Rationale

My research was a qualitative study. The phenomenon I was interested in studying was educators' perceptions about high school student drug offenses. A qualitative study enabled me to understand administrators' perceptions and disciplinary responses using an in-depth approach to discover how they make sense of these drug offenses and to understand their deeper beliefs that shaped their discipline practices. Through the interviews, I delved deeper into administrators' attitudes about drug offenses, how they believed they are currently dealt with,

and how they thought drug offenses should be addressed. I sought to capture the nuances concerning their attitudes and preconceived notions regarding student drug use.

Quantitative research would not have allowed me to adequately make sense of the complex beliefs people have about drug use, offenses, and addiction. I chose not to do surveys because I do not think they would have captured the complexities that encompass disciplining students for drug use. A survey alone would not have provided me with richness and depth. Qualitative research allowed me to better understand people's meanings and allowed me to contribute to the development of new theories and/or ideas regarding my topic (Creswell et al., 2007).

Methods

Valle Verde School District¹ is located in Riverside County. Riverside County is home to some of the most populated high schools in the state. Situated approximately 60 miles east of Los Angeles, Valle Verde School District high schools serve a wide range of students. Forty-seven percent of its 55,000 students are labeled as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 15% are classified as English language learners (California School Dashboard, n.d.). The high schools selected comprised racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student body populations, and some represented a near racial cross-section of the state of California.

Valle Verde District was seeking to alter its approach to drug offenses. The 2021–2022 school year marked the first year that the district allowed schools to not have to suspend students for drug use on their first offense but instead put them on a disciplinary contract while offering individual and group counseling support. This shift warranted further studies and understanding to uncover what and how those directly responsible for implementing such policies felt about

¹ Pseudonym

drug-related offenses. Their perceptions about this shift in policy was important because ultimately, school administrators decide the consequences for students caught under the influence or in possession of drugs. Furthermore, the district has trained some of its administrators in more restorative approaches to disciplining students.

My study focused on administrators because they are most likely to engage with students who may have been disciplined for drug use on school premises. For example, if a student is suspected of being under the influence or caught with drugs and or drug paraphernalia, the student is brought to an administrator to impose disciplinary actions. Assistant principals, at the direction of their principals, ultimately decide whether or not to suspend the student for their infractions and for how long.

There are eight high school principals and 30 assistant principals in the district. I purposefully sampled 10 district administrators: two principals from the comprehensive high schools, seven assistant principals from the comprehensive high schools, and an assistant principal from one of the alternative high schools. By including the perception and voices of a mix of principals and assistant principals, I ensured that both administrator voices were heard. I chose 10 administrators because there are five comprehensive high schools and two alternative high schools. The high school administrators were selected to include a mix of student demographics by school. Furthermore, participating administrators were purposefully selected based on gender and years of service to the extent possible with a sample of 10 to ensure diversity of thought and beliefs. Participants were purposefully selected to participate in this study because, although the district is advocating for more restorative approaches to students, administrators differ in their beliefs of what approaches work best to support drug offending

students. By obtaining various perspectives, I was interested in uncovering the breadth in administrator perceptions and identifying whether practices matched perceptions.

Access and Recruitment

I reached out to the administrative director who oversees principals and assistant principals and asked for permission to recruit the administrators in the district. I met with him on three occasions to discuss the details of my research and data collection process. After going through UCLA's IRB process, I went through the district's internal IRB process.

Once both were approved, I began my recruitment. I sent out an email to all the district high school administrators following the IRB guidelines. I purposefully recruited administrators who met my criteria. My recruitment strategy emphasized my role as a UCLA student and not as a fellow colleague. Because I work in the Valle Verde School District, I have developed close relationships with many fellow administrators. Because of the various leadership professional development trainings, retreats, and meetings we all attend, most high school administrators know each other. I leaned on the professional relationships I have cultivated over the years to ensure I had a mix of participants per my sample criteria. Participation in my study was on a voluntary basis. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide details about my study participants.

Table 1

Years of Administrative Experience

Number of years of experience	Number of participants
1-5	3
6-10	2
11-15	2
More than 15	3

Table 2*Race/Ethnicity*

Race/ethnicity	Number of participants
Asian	1
Black	1
Latinx	3
White	5

Table 3*Overview of Study Participants*

Name	Gender	Position	Suspend for first drug offense?
Rich	Male	Assistant principal	On the fence
Pedro	Male	Assistant principal	No
Eli	Male	Assistant principal	No
Isabella	Female	Assistant principal	Yes
Barry	Male	Principal	No
Suzanne	Female	Assistant principal	Yes
Bryan	Male	Assistant principal	Yes
Tammy	Female	Principal	Yes
Tyler	Male	Assistant principal	No
Aiden	Male	Assistant principal	Yes

Data Collection Methods

The interviews were semistructured to allow participants an opportunity to engage in open-ended conversation in which participants shared their perceptions and experiences with student drug offenses. My research interviews were a conversation with structure and a purpose. My interviews and conversations were systemized to ensure uniformity and consistency (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The questions asked explored perceptions of student drug use as well as the perceived way students should be disciplined for drug offenses. The draft protocol is in the

appendix. My theoretical lens of RJ guided my questioning because my goal was to uncover the various ways administrators exhibit and ultimately exert their disciplinary discretion. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hr and were conducted in-person in quiet office spaces at each of the high schools. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. While the interviews were being recorded, I took anecdotal notes.

Data Analysis Methods

I listened to my recordings to reflect on the interviews and then used TEMI for the initial data transcription. I revised for any transcription errors. After completing my transcriptions, I read the interviews, took careful notes, and highlighted any initial emerging themes and/or ideas that surfaced.

After the initial transcribing process, I was guided by Saldaña's (2021) manual for qualitative coding. I divided my coding process into two cycles. I used MAXQDA to help organize and analyze my data. For Part 1 of the first cycle, I used deductive structural codes. For the second part of the first cycle, I used inductive descriptive coding and value coding. For the second cycle of coding, I analyzed my codes and made meaning by categorizing them. During the second cycle is when I found patterns and a continuum of perspectives. I used categories and subcategories to search for broader patterns of meaning regarding beliefs about student drug use and methods for disciplining students. I coded my responses as either behaviorist or restorative. My analysis homed in on key terms and words instrumental in helping me better understand administrator perceptions. I also left room for themes to emerge as I analyzed my data to form conclusions. I analyzed the patterns and themes regarding student drug use and discipline perceptions data and formed conclusions based on the categories and subcategories that emerged in my participant responses.

Positionality and Ethical Issues

Even though my role is administrative and my focus was on administrators, I was still mindful of my positionality in relation to my participants. None of my interview participants were my subordinates. Participation was voluntary. In my interview protocol, I emphasized that their answers were confidential and would only be used for research purposes.

Although all of my participants knew that my role is as an administrator, I presented myself in the capacity of a researcher rather than a colleague. I wanted my participants to feel safe with their responses. Therefore, I stressed to them that their responses would not be identifiable in my research, and that I would not share their responses with district leadership.

To ensure confidentiality of my information, I kept all my data recordings, written notes, and files secure and in a locked cabinet at home to which I am the only person with access. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of my respondents. Because I interviewed only district administrators and no one who reports to me, I did not foresee any additional ethical concerns.

Reliability and Validity/Credibility and Trustworthiness

My study was subject to the threat of reactivity. It is very likely participants told me what they thought I wanted to hear. To address the threat of reactivity, I used systematic data collection to ensure I asked all participants the same questions regardless of other factors, such as my relationship with the person. My interview protocol began with simple informational questions to build rapport, and then I worked into questions that delved into perceptions about drug use and offenses. Additionally, it was important that I let all my participants know that as a researcher my interest was their perceptions and that I would not judge their responses. My job was to listen, record, and analyze their responses.

As a school administrator charged with disciplining students for various offenses, it was essential for me to be forthcoming about my preconceived notions related to student discipline. I espouse a belief that punitive means of correcting students, although well-intentioned, rarely lead to a change in negative behaviors. Maxwell (2012) pointed out that qualitative research is “primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study” (p. 124). By addressing my assumptions about student discipline, my plan was to mitigate my own personal biases and approach all of my respondents with objectivity and acceptance of their beliefs and assumptions.

I took anecdotal notes as the participants answered their questions. My interview protocols began by assuring my participants that I would maintain confidentiality, that their responses would be stored in a safe space, and that no names would be attached to their responses.

Study Limitations

My study aimed to decipher how administrators perceive and negotiate drug offenses to ultimately discipline students, but my study did not consider other factors that may contribute to how administrators discipline students for drug offenses. Another limitation to my study is that my focus was on administrators’ perceptions of drug offenses only. My study did not capture the perceptions of others such as teachers, classified staff, parents, and students. My study was limited to the perceptions of administrators, which might have been able to provide me with a broader understanding and perspective of disciplining students, but leaving out the voices of teachers, classified staff, parents, and students limited the generalizations I could make about overall perceptions. Further research on the perceptions of drug offenses of other stakeholders is needed to develop a more comprehensive approach to supporting struggling youth.

Conclusion

Research on drug offenses and the disciplinary consequences for high school students is limited. Administrators are generally the first line of defense to addressing and discipline students engaging in drug use and/or possession. Administrators' unique power, positionality, and discretion when it comes to addressing drug use are important to analyze and address. How administrators' perceptions impact their daily work is critical in understanding how their beliefs might ultimately impact their disciplining behaviors.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The emergence of zero-tolerance policies in schools has not been proven to reduce unwanted student behaviors, as described in Chapter 2. However, student drug offenses often fall under zero-tolerance guidelines whereby school administrators suspend students for drug use. Studies have concluded that approximately 75% of adolescents receiving substance use treatment are being treated for other mental health disorders, such as ADD, hyperactivity, conduct disorder, and depression (Camenga & Hammer, 2022). The prevalence of student drug use, coupled with the adverse life prospects for students with substance abuse disorders, warrants a closer examination of student drug offenses, administrator perceptions of drug offenses, and their disciplinary approaches.

This study sought to understand administrators' perceptions of student drug use and their disciplinary approaches. Consequently, findings from this chapter answer the following research questions:

1. What are high school administrators' perceptions of drug offenses, and how do those perceptions influence their beliefs about discipline for drug-related offenses in their schools?
2. What are high school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of restorative approaches to drug offenses?

I conducted in-person interviews with 10 administrators whose work experience ranged from 3 to 36 years. Before beginning my study, I conducted a purposeful sampling considering race, gender, and years of experience. I initially thought that I would see patterns in disciplinary responses based on race, gender, and years of experience. My results, however, did not yield patterns in disciplinary responses based on race, gender, and years of experience. As shown in

Table 4, two were principals, and eight were assistant principals. I briefly described each participant by gender, position, and whether or not they suspend students for a first drug offense. All names used are pseudonyms. Table 5 includes a list of the themes that emerged from my research and the corresponding research questions.

Table 4

Overview of Study Participants

Name	Gender	Position	Suspend for first drug offense?
Rich	Male	Assistant principal	On the fence
Pedro	Male	Assistant principal	No
Eli	Male	Assistant principal	No
Isabella	Female	Assistant principal	Yes
Barry	Male	Principal	No
Suzanne	Female	Assistant principal	Yes
Bryan	Male	Assistant principal	Yes
Tammy	Female	Principal	Yes
Tyler	Male	Assistant principal	No
Aiden	Male	Assistant principal	Yes

Table 5

Themes and Connection to Research Questions

Theme	Research Question	
	RQ1	RQ2
Perceptions of disciplinary responses		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief that suspension serves as a deterrent 	X	
Perceptions of student drug use	X	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intersection of mental health and drug use • Belief that students can be rehabilitated 	X	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of physical harm 		X
Perceptions of restorative approaches		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief that restorative approaches are useful and necessary • Disconnect between beliefs about discipline 		X

District Context

Valle Verde is composed of a racially/ethnically diverse student body. Nearly half of its student body are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Fifteen percent of students are English language learners. The district finds itself in a unique position since the 2021–2022 school year when the district allowed schools to not have to suspend students for a first-time drug offense but instead put them on disciplinary contract. The shift in policy is important to highlight because ultimately, administrators decide what the disciplinary responses should be for a first-time drug offense. Valle Verde School District represents a racially diverse student population. Traditionalist parents and community members sometimes resist the district’s efforts to implement progressive initiatives. However, regarding the potentially lethal effects of fentanyl, the district took immediate action to implement changes. Like many other districts across the country, Valle Verde School District has faced the harsh realities and dangers of fentanyl overdoses. Following several deaths by accidental overdose in the community, the district directed various educational campaigns and resources to raise awareness about the perils of fentanyl. A student near and dear to my heart, Jackson, nearly died of a drug overdose. Narcan saved his life, and I am happy to report that Jackson continues to teach me and many others about the power of second chances.

Findings

Although all participants in my study shared a commitment to supporting students with their struggles, their use of suspensions as a disciplinary response was mixed. Although six administrators believed suspensions were helpful, the other four embraced a no-suspension policy. They all said law enforcement should become involved when students deal drugs on campus. Their beliefs about discipline for students who use drugs were more varied however.

This chapter describes the findings of my study. It is broken down into three sections: (a) administrator perceptions of student discipline, (b) perceptions of student drug use, and (c) perceptions of the use of restorative practices. The findings begin with a summary of administrators' perceptions about discipline for drug-related offenses because these beliefs are connected to emerging themes regarding their perceptions of drug use and the use of restorative practices. Administrator perceptions about discipline focus on the key differences between those who suspend for first-time drug offenses and those who do not. For example, those who believe in the efficacy of suspensions believe that suspensions serve as a deterrent, but nonsuspending administrators view suspensions as ineffective in changing behaviors. Next, I present my findings about perceptions regarding student drug use. Nonsuspending administrators expressed their beliefs that adolescent drug use could be tied to mental health struggles, and all administrators viewed drugs as harmful and expressed a fear of physical harm. Last, I present my findings on the use of restorative approaches, which showcase administrators' belief in their efficacy while also pointing to a need for more training and better understanding.

Perceptions of Disciplinary Responses

Overall, six of the 10 administrators interviewed shared that suspensions were part of their disciplinary response and believed suspensions to be helpful in curbing drug use. Those administrators felt that suspension was a deterrent for students caught with drugs and the rest of the school community. The other four embraced a no-suspension policy and shared their beliefs about suspensions being ineffective at curbing drug use.

This section describes the key differences in the way administrators perceive suspensions. Administrators who view suspensions as effective cite that they serve as deterrents. In contrast, nonsuspending administrators view school as the safest place for students who struggle with drug

use because of the adult supervision inherent in a school setting. Additionally, seasoned administrators described an evolution of disciplinary beliefs from punitive to restorative during their careers. Although administrators shared varied beliefs about effective disciplinary responses, all administrators shared a deep commitment to supporting students and helping them overcome their drug use.

Views on Suspension

Suspends for First Drug Offense. All administrators expressed great care and concern for the students who struggled with drug use. The administrators who believed suspensions were a necessary disciplinary consequence noted that they served as a deterrent for future negative behaviors toward the offending student and others. Administrators with strong beliefs in favor of suspensions often mentioned being guided by the educational code and upholding order to ensure others did not think it was okay to engage in drug use. The perception of being soft on crime drove their beliefs about suspensions being a necessary response to curb drug use among students. Tammy explained her rationale:

There's a fine line between how it affects others. Because if we treat it like it's okay, the kids will become, because it's okay in the kids' world, they'll think that it's okay in our world too. Right. And there has to be somebody, I believe, teaching them it's not, okay, we don't do this. This is not normal. This has lasting impact on your life. (Tammy, principal)

Tammy's quote illustrated how she and other administrators viewed suspensions as deterrents. Her use of the phrase "how it affects others" signaled her belief that some students view the risk of suspension as a deterrent. Her views about suspensions were echoed in varying

ways by all administrators who felt that suspensions were necessary. She and others felt deeply concerned about how others might perceive not being punitive toward the offending student.

These administrators perceived suspending students as a way to let the student and the larger school community know drug use is unacceptable. They believed that not suspending students communicated that drug use was permissible. Aiden and Tammy, for example, both described the importance of issuing swift disciplinary consequences to ensure all students understood that drug use was “not okay.” Their views accentuate the complexity regarding the topic of drug use. Administrators who said that they care deeply about the well-being of their students talked about how they believe suspensions are essential to students learning a lesson that drugs are harmful and can potentially be lethal.

Does Not Suspend for First Drug Offense. Contrarily, the four administrators who did not think suspending students served as a deterrent cited that many students who engage in drug use do not always come from supportive households. In their view, suspending struggling students for 3 to 5 days unsupervised only created more opportunities for the student to engage in drug use. To these administrators, school support and counseling in place of a suspension sends a message that the school is there to be supportive and not punitive. Administrators who did not subscribe to a mandatory suspension for drug use shared how suspensions could be counterproductive. Tyler, for example, shared his disdain for suspensions:

I am really opposed to suspending. And the reason is when you look at what drives behavior, it’s usually the environment that the kid lives in. So when we see a kid is living in an environment that is toxic enough for them to be trying to escape the pain of that environment by getting high, and then our response as a system is to send that kid back

into that environment for 5 days where they're immersed in that toxicity and magically expect them to come back fixed? (Tyler, assistant principal)

A common thread among administrators who believed suspensions were ineffective was that they often sent a struggling student with minimal home support back to an unsupervised home. These administrators described the school as being "safer" because, at school, there's plenty of "adult supervision" whereas in some of the students' homes, parents might be at work while the student is sitting at home suspended from school. They felt that on-site intervention counselors, teachers, and other staff could help guide the student or prevent them from self-medicating while they were at school. To these administrators, the school was sometimes the only place where students might be fully supervised and safe. Additionally, they felt suspensions added to the shame and stigma that struggling students were already navigating.

Evolution of Disciplinary Beliefs

Two seasoned administrators who did not support suspensions for drug use, Barry and Eli, shared how their beliefs about student drug use evolved. They both reported that at the start of their careers, they viewed student drug use as a personal negative trait that warranted suspension and possible expulsion. However, these administrators began seeing student drug use as a more complex issue over time. Barry shared,

I was a hard-line guy. I mean, a 100% the hard-line guy. Like, you got busted, there was no ifs or buts, like you were gonna go home 5 days pending expulsion. ... You know, my views on, on dealing haven't changed one bit, but on using or being under the influence or being in possession, I would say that it's, it's yeah, it's absolutely changed. Like, there's no question, cuz before it was like, turn and burn, like, you know, "you're busted, you're gone." (Barry, principal)

Both shared they were more punitive in their approaches early in their careers. Eli elaborated by saying, “You wanted to make an example of a kid so others wouldn’t think drug use is okay.” Barry and Eli’s early career sentiments about disciplinary responses to drug use were similar to those expressed by participants who viewed suspensions as necessary.

In the interview, Barry expressed remorse for the students he had suspended and expelled early on in his administrative career. He recalled, “In those days, it didn’t matter if you had gotten to know the kid. It was like, ‘second offense, you’re out.’” He acknowledged having a different lens now, and if faced with the same student, he would probably refer the student to counseling. Barry was adamant, however, that he viewed drug use as problematic, but “what good is a suspension gonna do to a kid with addiction?”

Eli and Barry credited district support as instrumental in their decisions not to suspend students. They described district support as training, permission not to suspend, and the addition of an intervention counselor as contributing to their evolving beliefs. Both expressed that district support on not suspending students is key to making administrators feel safe with their decisions. Eli also shared how mental health awareness had driven the shift in conversations about drug use because of the district’s commitment to providing intervention counselors at each high school. These intervention counselors center students’ social-emotional needs. Eli said, “In those days, it was mandatory five days. We didn’t get intervention counselors at each school until about 5 to 6 years ago.” To Barry, drug use was “not always black and white.” His statement reflects how he shifted from mandatory suspension early on in his career to trying to connect students to support systems. As Barry and Eli learned more about why students might engage in drug use, they preferred a system in which students received more support from the school, such as the intervention counselor. Eli and Barry’s evolving beliefs about effective disciplinary responses

also highlight the complex factors and beliefs that come into play as administrators decide how to support students and discourage drug use simultaneously.

Perceptions of Drug Use

In the interviews, administrators shared their thoughts on why students use drugs. Although all 10 participants viewed teenage drug use as problematic and harmful to students' physical and emotional well-being, there were differences in their perspectives of why students use drugs in school and how to help them best. Three major themes emerged from the analysis of participants' perceptions of student drug use: (a) the intersection of mental health and drug use, (b) administrators' beliefs in students' rehabilitation, and (c) their fear of students harming themselves.

The Intersection of Mental Health and Drug Use

Interviewed administrators mentioned students engaging in drug use to avoid feelings related to their mental health struggles, past traumas, and overall self-medicating to numb their pain. Almost half of the administrators interviewed felt that drug use was a symptom of mental health conditions that only mental health professionals, such as the intervention counselor, could treat. Notably, these were also the four administrators who felt suspensions were ineffective. Rich, an administrator who was on the fence about suspending for first drug offenses, also shared his beliefs about the interconnectedness of drug use and mental health struggles. In his view, students who engaged in drug use, particularly at school, used drugs to cope with other mental health struggles. They believed that if students were engaged in drug use, they were probably trying to conceal other mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and unprocessed traumas.

In the interviews, administrators expressed some of the ways they thought students who use drugs were avoiding other issues. Pedro pointed out that drug use indicated more significant problems and that students “avoided feeling sober” by using drugs. Eli explained his perspective on how some students used drugs to “numb” uncomfortable feelings associated with their mental health struggles or past traumas. Eli observed that students who self-medicated usually struggled academically in addition to having mental health challenges. Rich noted that this fear led students to share how they tried to “escape reality.” He described students willing to engage in that risk as suffering from mental health issues, such as chronic anxiety or depression. He observed that “things have spiraled out of control for many drug-offending students.” These administrators believed drug use served as a numbing agent to help veil deeper mental health struggles.

Tyler also explained how drug use on campus signifies a more serious issue. He stated, “Like, they’re gonna do it at home at a party, you know, somewhere where they know the chances of getting caught are low. By the time they have the audacity to be doing it at school, it’s not their first rodeo, you know? So even the first drug violation is often the sign of a deeper issue. (Tyler, assistant principal)”

Tyler’s quote illustrates that many teens use drugs, but not many choose to do drugs on campus because the risks are exponentially higher. His use of the word “audacity” suggests that students may not think about the consequences of their actions. He stated that engaging in drug use on campus signaled deeper issues in which the benefit of self-medication far outweighed the potential consequences.

He and other administrators detailed how their investigations led them to engage in rich discussions with students about why students used drugs. Rich, who was on the fence about

suspensions, described how drug-offending students—fearful about getting into trouble with their parents and the school system—opened up about their drug use. When he pressed for more, students often shared difficult experiences and unprocessed traumas. Tyler shared how sometimes these candid discussions have led him to “have to file CPS [Child Protective Service] reports.” These administrators’ perceptions that drug use is a symptom of a deeper issue ultimately led them to believe that the best solution might not be suspension.

Rehabilitation

Regardless of whether administrators thought drug use was related to mental health or trauma issues or whether students should be suspended or not, all administrators believed students had the potential to be supported and helped to overcome possible habits that could become lifelong problems. Through their conversations with students after the drug offense, all administrators highlighted the importance of ensuring students understood that even though they had made a mistake, it did not have to define them for the rest of their lives, thus highlighting that all students could be remediated and rehabilitated. Respondents shared that counseling was necessary to help students overcome drug use. In the interviews, administrators used phrases such as “get them on the right path,” referred to drug infractions as “mistakes,” and referenced students as “getting better.” All participants stressed the importance of supporting students engaged in drug use. Bryan, an assistant principal, shared the importance of helping students who struggle with drug use:

I also don’t view people that have substance abuse or that are battling something like that, I don’t view them as weak or incapable. To me, it just says that they need help. And that’s what we’re here to do, right? Especially when we’re talking about kids. So we’re,

you know, this student needs help, and what are some things that I could do to help this student get better. (Bryan, assistant principal)

In this quote, Bryan, an assistant principal who issued suspensions as part of the disciplinary process, shared his view that students who struggle with drug use should not be viewed as fragile people but instead as individuals who struggle with something that can be remediated. Others such as Suzanne agreed. Although she does issue suspensions, she feels strongly that students should not feel alone, and she sees her role as helping them overcome their mistakes. She noted, “I want them to move forward with their lives and be successful, and we’re here to support them.”

All participants mentioned the Alternative Placement Contract (APC), which all drug-offending students are placed in. This contract provides personalized, supportive services for students, including group and individual counseling as well as academic resources. Whether through the APC or proper support and counseling, administrators authentically believed that all students could be rehabilitated and develop healthier coping mechanisms. These administrators stressed the importance of supporting students by providing more social-emotional and counseling support so they could unpack the reasons for self-medicating.

Fear of Harm

For all administrators, student well-being was the number one priority. Fear of harm caused by fentanyl poisoning, having a medical emergency, the extra strength of modern drugs, and the ease of concealment were common concerns. For example, throughout the interviews, every participant expressed fear of the dangers of physical harm for students who used drugs. They shared different accounts of angst over the potential of a fentanyl overdose, medical emergencies, and a deep concern for the potency of marijuana cartridges. Administrators

opposed to suspending students explained the need to help them uncover why they were engaging in drug use; those who favored suspensions cited their fear of physical harm to the student as one of the major factors contributing to their reasons for suspending.

Participants shared a particular fear of fentanyl—possibly because the district had an antifentanyl campaign—and they mentioned it for various reasons. Some described personal experiences with students having overdosed on fentanyl or the rising cases of overdose in the county. Valle Verde School District’s antifentanyl campaign included first aid training for all secondary administrators and security teams and training in how to administer Narcan (opioid overdose treatment). Rich pointed to the Narcan bottle in his office and explained the importance of “always having it visible because you never know.” He and others also recalled having crucial safety conversations with students about the lethal effects of fentanyl. Pro-suspension administrators often cited their disciplinary response as a way of showing the student and the school community that they were looking out for the well-being of all students.

Some said that fentanyl is a talking point with students disciplined for drug use. For example, in their follow-up discussions with students, some administrators would take the opportunity to educate them on the perils of fentanyl. Bryan recalled a conversation with a student in which he cautioned him about drug use because “there’s no way you know what’s in there.”

For administrators opposed to suspension, discussing the dangers of a possible accidental overdose was a way to engage in educational conversations. Offering resources and counseling, in addition to describing the potentially lethal effects of fentanyl, was their way of addressing fear of harm. Barry mentioned the rise in fentanyl overdoses and why student drug use is a school safety issue. He believed that although many students experiment with drugs, educating

students about the potentially lethal effects of fentanyl is crucial to curbing drug use. As he stated, “Fentanyl is kind of another level because of, you know, death rates and things of that sort” (Barry, principal).

Some participants recalled students’ severe adverse reactions to drugs. They recounted stories of students feeling frightened because they lost control of their bodies, passed out, or had slow or delayed breathing. Some recalled calling an ambulance so a student could receive medical attention. Although many cases of students being transported to the hospital ended with the student being okay, administrators shared fears for the worst possible outcome.

All of the participants felt a great sense of urgency. Those who believe in suspension also felt it was important to make an example of a student by suspending them. They believed this sent out a clear message that drug use is unacceptable and that adults would not “turn a blind eye” to it.

All of the administrators mentioned how drugs had evolved over the years through the legalization of marijuana and the advent of vapes. Their perceptions were that drugs, marijuana specifically, are now far more potent and therefore more harmful than they used to be. They referenced vape pens as “modern marijuana.” Some administrators opposed to suspensions articulated how they would use the disciplinary encounter to educate students on the potency of “modern marijuana.” They explained that their disciplinary meetings with students immediately following a drug offense were often a good time to discuss how potent and harmful controlled substances like marijuana could be on their developing brains and bodies. Isabella described how she would discuss with students the “negative impact getting high” could have on the teenage developing brain. Her view was that counseling students on the potentially harmful effects would be more beneficial than a suspension. Regardless of their beliefs about disciplinary responses,

administrators across the board expressed concern over the harmful physical effects drugs can potentially have on young minds.

Ease of concealment also worried many administrators because students could potentially be engaging in drug use at school and go undetected. Tammy highlighted the gap between students' use of vape pens and adults' familiarity with the evolving drugs. She recalled having to train teachers on vape pens and their appearance to ensure they remained vigilant about possible student drug use.

Use of Restorative Practices

In this section, I review the idea of restorative practices and describe participants' understanding of this approach as well as their views on the APC as restorative. I then underscore the power of relationships in disciplinary work. Finally, I highlight the varied levels of confidence that administrators feel about the use of restorative approaches.

Restorative practices refer to a disciplinary system that centers on repairing the harm done rather than punishment. The tenets of restorative justice practices are reintegration, repair, responsibility, respect, and relationships. In this particular district, administrators had received some training on restorative approaches, and the interviewed participants seemed optimistic about their use.

All interviewees shared that they had used restorative approaches when dealing with drug offenses. Administrators discussed the importance of treating the student with dignity and respect and intentionally building a relationship that remained long after the drug offense. Although few administrators could fully express the robust practices integral to implementing restorative practices; most related their restorative approach to the relationships they built with offending students and the APC, including mandatory counseling.

Tyler explained his understanding of restorative practices, calling them “80 to 90% preventative”:

Are we building community and belonging in the classroom? Are we building belonging in community at the school overall? Restorative practices—it’s not a response. It’s mostly a preventative system. (Tyler, assistant principal)

All administrators, whether or not they were well-versed in restorative approaches, emphasized the need to establish good relationships with students. They mentioned the importance of the student knowing they had an ally and a caring adult on campus regardless of their negative behavior. Participants stressed how building good relationships with students helps create a support system for those who might not necessarily have that at home. Additionally, some administrators mentioned how, through these conversations and relationship-building, they could understand why students engage in drug use. This deeper understanding helped administrators build empathy and compassion. Suzanne, for example, explained how she uses a drug offense as an opportunity to let students know that she is there to support them:

I try to establish a rapport and let them know that, you know, even though they’ve made a mistake, it’s okay. We all make mistakes. I want them to move forward with their lives and be successful, and we’re here to support them. And so yes, there are consequences, but I try to establish all of that and not come across as someone who’s upset with them to let them know that, yeah, we’re gonna have to talk to their parents and we’re gonna have to take care of what’s happened, but life will go on and they’ll be supported. (Suzanne, assistant principal)

Rich shared similar beliefs when he discussed what happens in his office immediately after a drug offense:

I want to build a rapport with them, that there's a level of trust that I'm working on their benefit and their behalf. Because whether they did drugs or not, they're still our student. You still have to love them, and you still have to kind of, you know, help show them that there's a better way—that maybe no one's listening at home, but somebody's listening at least here at school. That's the kind of impression I want the kids to understand. That this is not me against you. I'm not angry by their choices. I'm not disappointed. (Rich, assistant principal)

Many of the study participants used an investigation of a drug offense as an opportunity to get to know the student more, ask questions about their home life, and offer themselves as a resource to the struggling student. So although the circumstances through which they engaged with students were not ideal, building relationships with struggling students was important to all.

All administrators perceived the APC as restorative because it created many opportunities for students to build relationships with other caring adults. It was also the only systemized restorative approach in the district. Through the APC, students receive group and individual counseling and academic support. The contract, many shared, was a chance for students to obtain the necessary mental and social-emotional support following a drug offense. All participants credited their school's intervention counselor as critical in ensuring students received the support required. Even those who perceived suspension as a necessary part of the disciplinary process deemed counseling as necessary because it is supportive and rehabilitative.

Although all participants shared their belief in restorative disciplinary approaches, the spectrum of confidence related to their understanding of restorative practices and approaches was broad. Tyler was a trainer of trainers, so he felt relatively confident in the approach, but the others indicated that they needed more knowledge of restorative approaches. When asked what

resources would be most helpful to administrators seeking to better understand and implement restorative practices, eight answered, “training.” This suggests that although all were somewhat familiar with the definition of restorative practices and approaches, most felt they needed a better understanding of what implementation means and looks like in practice.

Administrators’ willingness to ask for more training signaled that they were interested in learning to be more restorative in their approaches. Barry, a principal, described what he felt would be most helpful to administrators seeking to implement restorative practices:

I think training and restorative practices in itself is huge, because I still don’t think that’s done widely enough. We’re not really well trained and well versed in that. I think most of what we do is by feel and through experience, rather than like, “Hey, this is actual training.” That’s not part of your admin credential program. It’s a lot of just experience, life experiences and dealing with it. So I mean what’s most helpful would be actual training. (Barry, principal).

Administrators’ admission of needing more training highlights the need to understand better alternative methods of disciplining and supporting students.

Disconnect Between Beliefs and Practices

Although all administrators shared their interest in helping and supporting struggling students and a view of using restorative approaches, six of them shared that suspension was an essential part of the disciplinary process but did not perceive this as contradicting restorative approaches. Thus, there is a clear disconnect between their beliefs in restorative approaches and their disciplinary practices.

Administrators who shared that suspensions were part of their disciplinary responses described a typical drug offense as one in which the student gets caught for either suspicion,

possession, or active use; the student is brought up to an administrative office where they call home; and then the student is suspended for 5 days. Those participants did not see a disconnect between their beliefs and practices because they viewed their approach as restorative because of the use of the APC. Participants who were in support of suspension mentioned the APC and referred to it as restorative even though most viewed suspensions as a natural progression of the response to drug offenses.

Isabella and Suzanne, both assistant principals, felt that the district's use of counseling, and specifically the APC, was helpful, supportive, and restorative; however, both acknowledged using suspensions as part of their disciplinary response. Isabella, for example, compared not suspending students to "turning a blind eye." Similarly, Tammy described the importance of schools being spaces where students are supported and cared for, especially when they make mistakes. She explained how positive relationships with caring adults on her campus helped keep some of her neediest students away from trouble. When asked about disciplinary responses to drug use, Tammy described schools as the "one place where the adults have to say this is not okay." She equated suspensions with sending a zero-tolerance message to all students. Her view was that if students are not suspended, then the message students receive is that drugs are permissible.

Aiden shared the importance of treating students with dignity and respect during disciplinary encounters following a drug offense. He described the importance of connecting students to restorative and supportive resources. At the same time, Aiden also described a world in which "50% of students" would be under the influence of drugs if suspensions were not issued to drug-offending students. Similarly, Bryan noted that he wholeheartedly believes in the power of restorative justice and approaches. He spoke about his interest in ensuring he connected

students and their families to the necessary support. However, when asked about suspensions as disciplinary consequences, Bryan shared that a 5-day suspension was the norm for a controlled substance violation.

Thus, although all administrators expressed a belief in the importance and power of restorative approaches, there was a disconnect between their beliefs and their practices. A restorative approach to drug-offending students would not include a suspension; however, most administrators continue to use suspensions as a disciplinary response. This, however, aligns with what most participants shared about their comfort level regarding their understanding of restorative practices. Most administrators did not feel they were adequately trained on what it looks like to implement at the school level. This disconnect and possible implications are addressed in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter described administrators' perceptions about effective disciplinary practices, their perceptions of student drug use, and their beliefs about restorative justice. When it comes to disciplinary responses, administrators fall into two categories: those who believe in the efficacy of suspensions and those who do not. Those who believe suspensions to be effective see them as a deterrent; those who do not see suspensions as effective view them as potentially harmful. Although they all believed in using restorative approaches to discipline, the only clear consensus was about counseling and relationship-building. Therefore, this study uncovered the paradoxes of disciplinary beliefs and practices. As I discuss in the next chapter, this study also uncovered possible next steps for district leaders and policymakers regarding training and support for administrators on the front lines confronting drug-related offenses.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

School-to-prison pipeline studies have focused on racial disparities, inequitable disciplinary practices, and the disproportionality in student suspensions (Wald & Losen, 2003). Researchers have studied suspensions and their inefficacy and concluded that suspended students face negative life outcomes (Skiba et al., 2014). This study sought to contribute to existing knowledge by examining administrators' perceptions of student drug use, their disciplinary responses, and their beliefs about restorative approaches to student drug use. Because administrators play a pivotal role in issuing disciplinary consequences to offending students, it is crucial to examine their perceptions.

My research aimed to explore the role of administrators' perceptions of drug offenses by focusing on the following research questions:

1. What are high school administrators' perceptions of drug offenses, and how do those perceptions influence their beliefs about discipline for drug-related offenses in their schools?
2. What are high school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of restorative approaches to drug offenses?

This qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with 10 high school administrators in a large suburban school district in Southern California. These interviews allowed participants to share their experiences administering discipline to drug-offending students.

This study sought to advance the literature on zero-tolerance policies, particularly concerning student drug offenses. Its focus on administrator perceptions of student drug use and how those perceptions informed disciplinary responses sheds light on how administrators

rationalized how they manage consequences. This study also focused on administrator perceptions of restorative approaches and called attention to the importance administrators place on building strong relationships with their students, particularly when they are issuing a disciplinary consequence. Although every administrator in the study pointed to the importance of relationships, suspensions directly contradicted many participants' beliefs about disciplining students. Most participants felt that a school suspension was necessary for the disciplinary process. Administrators' overall sense of obligation to support students and their beliefs that students can be rehabilitated is promising and showcases their willingness to support struggling students.

The administrators in this study believe that rehabilitation is possible for students. They also perceived a connection between drug use and mental health struggles. Last, there was a disconnect between what administrators said about restorative justice and their practices regarding disciplinary approaches. Although all administrators stated they believed in applying restorative practices to their disciplinary procedures, many still felt that school suspensions were essential to the disciplinary process. In this final chapter, I review my findings by theme, discuss the practice implications, make recommendations for future research, present limitations to this study, and share my final conclusion.

Summary and Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I summarize my findings by theme: (a) perceptions of disciplinary responses, (b) perceptions of student drug use, and (c) perceptions about the use of restorative approaches. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for developing effective response strategies. My research attempts to add to this knowledge by investigating how administrators' perceptions of student drug use ultimately influence their disciplinary approaches. By gaining a

deeper understanding of administrators' perceptions, my research can inform the development of drug-response policies that better meet the needs of students.

Administrator Perceptions of Student Discipline

Two major themes emerged in my analysis of disciplinary responses: those who believed in the efficacy of suspensions and those who did not. Some administrators believed that suspensions were the most effective way to manage student behaviors and even help curb drug use. In contrast, others felt this approach was counterproductive and preferred alternative methods to support students.

Administrators for Suspensions: A Conflict in Beliefs

The six administrators who viewed suspensions as a necessary part of the disciplinary process believed that suspensions served as a deterrent and sent a strong message to all students and the community that drugs are unacceptable. However, even with their belief in suspensions, they all shared their care and concern for supporting students through counseling and using intervention counselors. These administrators strongly believed that students should be supported and remediated and also shared that their district was being restorative in its approaches. None of these administrators viewed suspensions as contradictory to restorative approaches. They all believed disciplining students for drug offenses was a form of support. For example, all six of these administrators shared that they felt counseling, relationships, and support systems were essential to supporting the struggling students and yet were steadfast in their beliefs that students should be suspended for drug use.

This conflict among these six administrators' beliefs was potentially a byproduct of the fear of physical harm to the student and the perception others might have of their response to drug use. For example, three participants mentioned what the rest of the student body would

think of them if they did not suspend students. Another participant mentioned the importance of “not turning a blind eye,” and another mentioned the need for the school to be the one place where students knew drugs were unacceptable. Their beliefs about the need for suspensions focused on the fear of physical harm and this need to portray to others that drugs were not permissible. Their perspective aligns with behaviorist psychology, stipulating that negative behaviors in children can be corrected with punishment (Palardy, 1988). Administrators who believed suspensions were an essential part of the disciplinary process while holding strong views on the efficacy of restorative approaches reconciled the discrepancy by emphasizing the physical dangers of drugs. To these six administrators, suspension as a punishment was a powerful deterrent for students engaging in drug use.

Although the findings on administrators’ beliefs that suspensions served as a deterrent are supported by research (Palardy, 1988), I hope that this research adds to the body of knowledge by examining how a variety of factors influence their disciplinary beliefs. These factors include concerns about student safety and well-being and pressure to maintain a tough stance on drug use. Understanding the complex factors influencing administrators’ beliefs about student discipline for drug use is an important first step to shifting mindsets about the use of restorative approaches.

Administrators Opposing Suspensions: Unpacking the “Why” of Drug Use

The four administrators who viewed suspensions as ineffective believed that students who engaged in drug use were self-medicating to conceal deeper struggles. They also expressed fear of physical harm to students because of drug use but felt the suspension would not help the student. These four administrators stressed that an out-of-school suspension could sometimes be more harmful because there was a possibility the student might be unsupervised at home and

thus engage in more drug use. These administrators' views aligned with the restorative justice theoretical framework, which seeks to identify the harm, needs, and obligations to heal all parties harmed, including the individual. Achieving justice is about making amends, restoring relationships, and addressing the offender's accountability (Qi, 2022). The common thread in their responses was that more significant support and counseling could help the struggling student overcome the need to self-medicate.

This finding, although not generalizable, potentially highlights that administrators with a more compassionate and supportive approach may recognize drug use as a symptom of deeper underlying issues. To these four administrators, unpacking "why" students engage in drug use is more beneficial than a suspension. Their beliefs focus on students dealing with past traumas and support them to develop healthy coping mechanisms. These participants described how students with addictions to drugs sometimes come from homes where parental support is minimal, which two of them mentioned could be a contributing factor as to why the student might be self-medicating. Addressing the reason(s) for students self-medicating helps get to the root of the problem whereas an out-of-school suspension is a response to the behavior. These administrators' beliefs align with restorative approaches because they focus on rehabilitating and reintegrating the offending student (Qi, 2022). Teaching students healthier coping mechanisms with available resources is more helpful than an out-of-school suspension. By reframing disciplinary responses in this way, schools can better support students struggling with drug use.

Two participants shared that their views evolved about their disciplinary practices. Administrators whose views had evolved shared two commonalities. First, they each credited district support and permission not to suspend students making them feel safe in their decisions. Second, they each detailed how getting to know the students' stories and why they engaged in

drug use helped shift and soften their once hard-line approaches to discipline. This finding is important because it sheds light on possible ways to shift mental models about the need to suspend. Understanding how these administrators' views evolved provides insight into how to support administrators responsible for administering discipline to some of the most vulnerable students.

Administrator Perceptions of Student Drug Use

Although studies on suspensions are abundant (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Heilbrun et al., 2015; Howard, 2008, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba & Losen, 2016; Teske, 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003), few studies exist specifically on administrator perceptions of student drug use. All 10 administrators perceived drug use as particularly harmful to young developing minds and shared a genuine belief that students could overcome this mistake or addiction. These findings are promising because they highlight administrators' beliefs in supporting students to overcome a mistake or addiction. Throughout their interviews, participants shared their counseling referral system to ensure students received intensive counseling to unpack why they might be experimenting with drugs. The overarching theme in their perceptions about student drug use was constant; students could overcome it through proper support and guidance. This finding is reassuring because it suggests that all administrators view drug use as a problem that can be solved with the right support and resources. By taking this approach, schools can create a more positive and empowering student environment. Ultimately, this can lead to better student outcomes and a healthier, more productive community overall.

All 10 participants shared a fear of physical harm from drug use, particularly fentanyl. Some of the participants recalled calling first responders because the reaction to the drug had been so extreme, and others referred to Narcan, an antioverdose medication. Others shared their

fear that students had unknowingly consumed fentanyl and could be at risk of death. They also questioned the long-term effects of drugs on the developing brain and how being in an altered state of mind could not be conducive to learning. Last, some shared a deep concern for how drugs, particularly marijuana, had become more potent and harder to detect. All administrators shared that drug use posed a great risk to the physical well-being of their students.

Participants who did not suspend for a first-time drug offense shared a common belief that students needed support more than they needed to be disciplined. They all feared drugs were harming their students. Some of the participants felt that students needed to be punished as a deterrent, but others felt they needed to be at school instead of home where outcomes could be worse for them. These administrators highlighted how often students' drug use was a byproduct of mental health struggles. Although many administrators shared that they defer to counselors and therapists better versed in supporting students with mental health disorders, they shared their belief that drug use is often the symptom of something more profound.

These findings are supported by the research on adolescent drug use, highlighting the need for drug use to be treated as a health concern. Studies on teenage drug use have asserted that teens, particularly those with depressive disorders, use drugs to relieve and manage psychological stressors (Grigsby et al., 2016; Stapinski et al., 2016). A study on early drug use in adolescents found that students self-reported mental health struggles (Brownlie et al., 2019). A UK longitudinal study on over 19,000 adolescents found a correlation between teenage drug use and adverse childhood experiences. Students who had experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences were likelier to engage in drug use as teens. (Karamanos et al., 2022). Given the adverse effects of drug use on the developing brain, reframing it as a health concern might be a more fruitful way of supporting students.

When these administrators viewed drug use as indicative of a more profound underlying mental health concern, their disciplinary responses were more restorative. Thus, if institutional changes are to be made to how schools and administrators respond to drug offenses, they must begin by helping to reframe the problem and shifting mental models concerning why students use drugs. For the two administrators whose views evolved, it was through conversations with students that their views relaxed. Both explained how getting to know the students had helped them better understand why they had turned to drug use.

It is natural for administrators to have concerns about their students' safety and well-being, especially regarding drug use and its possible lethal effects. However, it is important to approach disciplinary responses with a balanced perspective considering the potential negative effects of suspensions and other punitive measures. By focusing on rehabilitation and providing students with access to resources and support, schools can create a safer and more supportive environment for students. Ultimately, the goal is to support students to overcome their challenges and to thrive academically and personally.

Administrator Perceptions About the Use of Restorative Approaches

All study participants shared their belief in restorative approaches. Although there were varying ranges in their comfort level and understanding of restorative approaches, there were commonalities in their responses. All 10 participants shared that their approach to restorative practices was building and maintaining relationships with drug-offending students. They mentioned the need to know the student and why they had resorted to drug use. As previously mentioned, administrators who described a shift in their beliefs from punitive to restorative emphasized conversing with their students and getting to know them better. They credited

building relationships and getting to know their students' struggles better as instrumental in their disciplinary transformation.

The finding regarding moving to restorative practices is consistent with the research on restorative disciplinary approaches, highlighting a more positive, less punitive approach to repairing harm, emphasizing fair process, restoring relationships, and resolution through reparation (McCluskey et al., 2008). Even though the final finding sheds light on the inconsistent application of restorative approaches, this finding accentuates that some aspects of restorative approaches—specifically, building strong relationships—are widely accepted. Administrators shared the importance of getting to know the students and their stories and ensuring they treated each one with dignity and respect. This finding is promising because it recognizes some administrators' need for a more holistic approach to drug use, focusing on rehabilitation rather than just punishment. State and district leaders must capitalize on administrators' perceptions about applying restorative approaches to help shift their mindsets about using these approaches to deal with students' drug use.

Even though most study participants shared that they believed in the power of restorative approaches and all referenced building relationships with students and referring them to counseling as part of the disciplinary process, six administrators also shared that school suspension was necessary for the disciplinary process. These findings coincide with the literature on school suspensions. Although administrators shared their beliefs in the power of restorative approaches and a deep concern for supporting students, many still viewed suspensions as a deterrent to help curb drug use on their campuses. Although many administrators mentioned fear of fentanyl as a driving force behind their wanting to tackle student drug use on their campuses, a theme of having to teach students about consequences through suspensions also emerged.

The disconnect between beliefs and practices when it comes to the use of restorative approaches highlights the need for more education and training regarding this approach. Although many administrators may see the value in restorative approaches, they may not fully understand how to put these approaches into practice effectively. Additionally, the fact that administrators still believe in the efficacy of suspending students for drug use suggests a need for more research and evidence-based practices. It may be necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of restorative approaches and provide administrators with the knowledge and tools needed to implement these approaches successfully. Ultimately, the goal should be to create a system that prioritizes the well-being and success of all students while also upholding standards for safety and accountability.

Study Implications

It is hoped that the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of why administrators suspend or do not suspend students for drug offenses. First, they reveal how the administrators in this study perceive student drug use and how this connects to their beliefs about suspension. Second, these findings shed light on the caring and hopeful disposition of administrators, particularly their concerns for students' well-being and their belief in rehabilitation for those who use drugs. Last, the findings reveal that administrators to whom I spoke might understand the potential benefits of restorative approaches but may not fully embrace them and continue to rely on suspensions as a solution. Together, these findings shed light on implications for leaders, practitioners, and scholars. They accentuate the importance of informing educational stakeholders, particularly those responsible for administering discipline to students, on restorative practices and disciplinary approaches.

Implications for Practice

Training on Restorative Approaches

In districts using restorative approaches, district leadership should prioritize more education and training regarding restorative approaches and evidence-based practices for dealing with student drug use. Although all administrators shared that they believed in using restorative approaches, only four of the 10 participants highlighted that they do not suspend students. Some administrators shared that they were not confident in their understanding of restorative practices, and many ultimately revealed a disconnect between their beliefs and practices. Districts and schools steeped in restorative disciplinary approaches pay close attention to preventative measures, including building communities of care and fostering strong relationships with staff and students. Strong foundations rooted in healthy adult and student relationships are conducive to repairing harm less punitively. Restorative practices are rooted in repairing harm when harm is done and ensuring the offenders reflect on how their actions impacted others and the community.

School districts must contextualize student drug use on campus as students crying out for help and needing support. For administrators to feel confident about not suspending students, they have to believe that the student is crying out for help. This study aimed to help practitioners respond more restoratively and abandon punitive responses.

District Support for the Implementation of Restorative Approaches

District leaders must communicate expectations regarding restorative practices. Administrators who shared a shift in their disciplinary approaches from punitive to restorative attributed their nonsuspension beliefs to district support. They claimed they felt confident with their decisions because their district office had given them “permission” not to suspend students

for a drug offense. When administrators feel safe and supported in their restorative disciplinary approaches, they are more likely to be restorative.

Reframing Drug Use as a Health Crisis

Explicit training on restorative approaches to student drug use must include carefully reframing the problem as a health concern rather than bad behavior. Administrators whose views were more restorative viewed suspensions as ineffective and believed in addressing the “why” of drug use. Reframing drug use as a health concern is an important first step in addressing the root causes of drug use. By approaching student drug use this way, schools can reduce stigma, increase access to treatment and support, and promote better health and academic outcomes for students. Doing so can also help destigmatize the negative associations society and school administrators in particular have toward drug offenses and help redirect resources to students struggling with drug use. Additionally, informing the public on how and why some students might resort to self-medicating might inform a more therapeutic approach instead of the current punitive one consisting of an out-of-school suspension. Offering more training to school administrators responsible for disciplining drug-offending students can be a valuable tool to change perceptions and mindsets about drug offenses. This training can help inform how administrators, through their relationship-building, can be more supportive of their students struggling with drug use.

Additionally, reframing drug use as a student’s cry for help rather than students being disobedient or defiant might make administrators feel more comfortable about not issuing suspensions. There are many different reasons why students engage in drug use; some might experiment with drugs because they are curious, others to numb some pain, others to cope with problems, and still others for recreational purposes. The students referenced in this study chose

to engage in drug use despite being in highly monitored and controlled environments. There is something to be said about students who, despite all the ways they can get caught, still choose to engage in drug use. Reframing drug use as a cry for additional support might be one way to help shift administrators' views from punitive to restorative.

Study Limitations

Although the findings unveil valuable insight into administrators' perceptions of student drug use, disciplinary consequences, and the use of restorative approaches, it is important to recognize the study's limitations. First, this study took into account the beliefs and perceptions of a group of only 10 administrators. It was not my attempt to generalize these findings to all administrators. Administrators do not execute discipline in a vacuum but are a product of various systems and processes. Administrators consider various factors when orchestrating disciplinary consequences for drug use, such as teacher and community perceptions and district office directives. Along the same lines, this analysis was limited to administrator perceptions and has the potential to help inform best support practices. Had I interviewed students, teachers, community members, and intervention counselors, I may have learned more about the various mindsets that help shape disciplinary responses.

The other notable limitation was that I researched in one district with a wide range of disciplinary responses to student drug use. The district where I conducted my research is in the initial phases of implementing restorative approaches to drug use, as evidenced by their Alternative Placement Contract (APC) and intervention counselors. Perhaps interviewing people in a district where suspensions for drug offenses are the norm or are unacceptable may have yielded different results.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research is needed to better support students who use drugs. Because many addicts begin experimenting with drugs in their teenage years, educators and health experts must join forces to implement effective prevention strategies. Future research could include student perceptions to understand better why they use drugs at school and learn about the best intervention strategies. Complementary to research focusing on student voices, future research should include interviews with teachers, community members, and families of students struggling with drug use to understand their beliefs about effective interventions. Researchers could also seek to understand better the perspective of those tasked with supporting students who engage in drug use, such as drug counselors and therapists. Elevating the voices of professionals supporting students and highlighting their best practices would help change the narrative about student drug use. Thus, gaining insight into best practices by talking to students, families, and mental health experts could help mitigate the harmful effects of student drug use. Last, researchers could explore districts that successfully implement restorative approaches to student drug use. Highlighting their success in reducing or combating student drug use while offering support can help lead the way for other districts seeking to better support students struggling with drug use.

Conclusion

Student drug use is perceived to be a serious problem that could potentially lead to death. Policymakers, district leaders, and school administrators interested in positively impacting students dealing with drug use must carefully analyze their current approaches and seek to adopt restorative approaches designed to meet the needs of their students. Lives are at stake.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol for Administrator Interviews

Background: I will be interviewing principals and assistant principals with whom I have a working relationship. To ensure a diverse sample, participants were intentionally selected to account for variance in age, race, ethnicity, gender, and years of service. Administrators selected represent both comprehensive high schools and one alternative high school in a large suburban school district in Southern California. I will be conducting all interviews in person. I will record them using a recording device as well as my phone for backup. I will listen to each interview twice and then transcribe them.

Purpose: I am interested in understanding administrators' perceptions of drug offenses.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are high school administrators' perceptions of drug offenses, and how do those perceptions influence their beliefs about discipline?

RQ 2: What are high school administrators' perceptions about the use of restorative approaches to drug offenses?

Protocol:

Good afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this interview. I am a doctoral candidate at UCLA's Graduate School of Education, and I'm interested in learning about administrators' perceptions of high school students' drug offenses and disciplinary actions. I will be asking you various questions regarding your philosophies surrounding drug offenses and disciplinary actions surrounding drug offenses.

Purpose: I am interested in learning more about high school administrators' perceptions of student drug use and restorative approaches. This interview will last approximately one hour.

Everything you discuss with me during this interview is strictly confidential, so please feel free to speak openly and freely. To accurately record our conversation, I would like to record it so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim digitally. Your individual responses will remain 100% anonymous. In the event that one of your responses is captured in my writing, pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity. Additionally, as a researcher, I am interested in capturing people's true perceptions of student drug use and perceived adequate disciplinary actions that should be imposed on students. Because my approach is that of a researcher, I want to assure you that I am not judging your responses in any way. Please feel free to speak freely and openly. If there are points during the interview where you would like the recorder off, please feel free to press the off button on the recorder. Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

Background questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. How long have you been in the field of education?
2. What is the greatest challenge you have faced this week?
3. What role do you play in disciplining students?

Questions related to perceptions of drug offenses/infractions

4. On a scale of 1-10, how serious do you consider drug offenses? (in terms of what?)
5. What type of drug-related offenses do you tend to have at your school?
6. What if any differences are there in the types of drug offenses you deal with?
7. What do most administrators in your district think of drug offenses and or drug policies?

How do you know this?

8. How do you believe administrators should deal with drug offenses?
9. What is your response to student drug offenses?

10. What do you think is the WRONG administrative response to drug offenses?
11. When do you think law enforcement should get involved?
12. How do you reconcile your beliefs if they differ from current policies?

Questions related to Restorative or Behaviorist approaches

13. What do you think of restorative approaches to drug-related offenses?
14. What do you think of suspensions as an approach to drug-related offenses?
15. What if any restorative approaches have you used when dealing with student drug offenses?
16. What do you think teachers and other staff think when they think of restorative approaches to discipline? How do you know this?
17. What resources do you believe are most helpful to administrators implementing restorative approaches to disciplining students?

Successes and failures

18. Do you have a drug offense success story you would like to share?
19. Do you have a drug offense failure story you would like to share?

Conclusion

20. What advice would you give to new administrators dealing with drug offenses?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add that will help me better understand your perceptions of drug offenses?

Thank you for your time. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and allowing me to better understand how administrators deal with drug offenses and infractions.

*Although I am not stating it beforehand, I will be sending each participant a \$20 Starbucks gift card as a small way of saying thank you. \$20 does NOT even begin to cover the cost of their time but it's a small way to show gratitude.

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