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“Hear Me Out:”

Elementary Black Students’ Experiences with Exclusionary Discipline

And the Racial Discipline Gap

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

by

Anna Bae Kim

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Hear Me Out:”

Elementary Black Students’ Experiences with Exclusionary Discipline
And the Racial Discipline Gap

by

Anna Bae Kim

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

This qualitative study investigated the experiences and the impact of the racial discipline gap on upper elementary Black students. It also examined their insights and suggestions on how to mitigate this systemic inequity that results in the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline beginning in early childhood education and impacting their educational trajectory and life. In order to preserve student voice, the interviews were analyzed and coded using structural coding and in vivo coding. The findings reflect how these upper elementary Black participants incurred differential treatment in various ways that resulted in negative academic, emotional, and social effects. As schools look for ways to decrease suspensions and expulsions by implementing interventions such as PBIS and Restorative Justice Practices,

findings suggest the need to build an awareness of differential treatment of Black students and to evaluate structures in schools that result in punitive consequences. The findings also suggest the importance of providing voice and choice to our Black students, which can include Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and increased opportunities for them to feel heard. Participants also indicated resilience strategies they utilize to cope when dealing with negative experiences. Counternarratives developed from these interviews as all the student participants shared how they enjoyed learning and wanted to learn. Based on the findings, this dissertation shares the implications and recommendations for educators, schools, and future research to further decrease the inequities resulting from the racial discipline gap.

The dissertation of Anna Bae Kim is approved.

Megan Loef Franke

Daniel G. Solórzano

Tyrone C. Howard, Committee Co-Chair

Kristen Lee Rohanna, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION PAGE

To my Immigrant parents, who sacrificed so much and instilled the importance of education so that their 3 children may have a voice;

To my children, Jonah and Jessie, who were my inspiration when I wanted to quit because I wanted them to have a mom who they could be proud of- may you use your voice to help others;

To my dearest husband, Moses, who exhibited the most patience and support the last 3 years and who I could not have completed this journey without- thank you for giving me the gift of time to

find and share my voice.

I dedicate this dissertation to all of you.

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VITA

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The recent socio-political climate and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement remind our nation of the many racial injustices Black people face- injustices that also persist in education. These systemic inequities exist in education and create an “educational debt,” or more commonly used “opportunity gap,” for Students of Color, particularly Black students (Howard, 2020, Ladson-Billings, 2006). Unequal access to key resources undergirds much of the startling statistics that show racial disparities in reading and math scores, and overrepresentation of Black students in suspensions (Losen et al., 2015; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Romero et al., 2020; Smolkowski et al., 2016). Thus, the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline practices remains a critical issue.

Such exclusionary discipline leads to dire psychological, emotional, and academic consequences that impinge the trajectory of a student’s life (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Skiba & Losen, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2018). Steele (2010) explains the damaging psychological consequences as students experience situations with increased stereotype threat¹, which induces stress, undermines performance, and increases their awareness of bias and unfairness of treatment in situations as they approach adolescence (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2009; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Lowered academic motivation and feelings of anger and depression are other negative developmental outcomes that result from repeated exposure to racial discrimination (Darensbourg et al., 2010; English et al., 2020; Eccles et al.,

¹ Steele (2010) explains stereotype threat as individuals knowing certain stereotypes attributed to their identity in situations, which affects one’s performance.

2006). These negative experiences adversely affect Black students academically, leading to decreased graduation rates, and an increased probability of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, also known as the “school to prison pipeline” (Anyon et al., 2018; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Skiba & Losen, 2010). Statistics from the United States Department of Justice reports 68% of Black male prisoners did not obtain a high school diploma, and 35% of Black male prisoners experienced academic and disciplinary problems in school, which reinforces the gravity of this inequity (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Background of the Racial Discipline Gap

The racial discipline gap signals a threatening systemic inequity for Black students. Decades of research beginning from the 1970s reveal how schools consistently inflict exclusionary discipline practices at disproportionate rates on Students of Color- Black males and females in particular (McIntosh et al., 2018; Smolkowski et al., 2016). While White students experienced a decrease in suspension rates, Black students’ rates of Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) still increased (Skiba & Losen, 2010; McIntosh et al, 2018). In 2015, the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) conducted a study that found that African American elementary students incurred a suspension rate of 8% compared to 2% of White elementary students (Losen et al., 2015).

Further analysis of discipline data unveils higher rates of subjectivity towards Black students in exclusionary discipline practices. Many studies, including one by Bradshaw et al. (2018), show Black students being sent to the office for subjective behaviors such as sustained loud talking, defiance, and roughhousing, as opposed to White students who

received ODRs for objective behaviors such as vandalism, smoking, etc. (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Smolkowski et al., 2016; Staats, 2015). In fact, the CRDC published data that showed “Disruption and Willful Defiance” as the most frequent state code label used for ODRs (Losen et al., 2015). These administrations of ODRs and suspension for subjective reasons express value judgements, which suggests a perpetuation of racial bias in discipline.

Negative Impact of Racial Bias in Discipline

Racial bias in discipline negatively impacts students in various ways. One damaging consequence is the loss in instructional time. An average suspension lasts 3.5 days, and studies show that students suspended once are more likely to receive at least a second suspension (Losen et al., 2015). This loss of instructional time proves problematic as a study by Ginsburg et al. (2014) indicates poor attendance leads to poorer academic performance. Their analysis of 12 fourth grade scores showed that students who missed three or more days of school scored an average of 12 points lower in the area of reading on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” than students with no absences, which translates to a full grade lower on the NAEP achievement scale (Losen et al., 2015). Further analysis of suspension discipline in California noted “Disruption and Willful Defiance” as the main reasons for suspensions- all subjective coding as previously noted (Losen et al., 2015).

Various studies also point to the negative psychosocial impact on Black students due to acts of discrimination and racial bias (English et al., 2020; Lee, 1999). One particular mixed methods study found that adolescent Black students encountered an average of over five occurrences of racial discrimination per day across different contexts in their daily lives, including schools (English et al., 2020). The study further discovered a positive slope

association linking instances of discrimination with increased depressive symptoms. As a result, the researchers discuss the importance of recognizing and validating these discriminatory experiences to combat harmful practices in education (English et al., 2020).

School to Prison Pipeline

The racial discipline gap presents a dire problem as several seminal studies also correlate exclusionary discipline to high rates of referrals to judicial systems, leading to incarceration, otherwise known as the “school to prison pipeline” (Anyon et al., 2018; Darensbourg et al., 2010). One particular study conducted by Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009) sought to find the connection between out-of-school suspensions and overrepresentation of Black youth in the juvenile system *independent* of the influence of environmental factors such as poverty, employment, and population density. The study found that a one standard deviation increase in out-of-school suspensions for Black students resulted in a 0.38 standard deviation increase to referrals to the juvenile system, which indicates a considerably large impact.

The “school to prison pipeline” impacts the trajectory of the life of a Black student. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that 68% of Black male prisoners did not graduate from high school, with 35% reporting a lack of engagement as the main reason for not acquiring a high school diploma (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Research also suggests that disengagement leads to feelings of alienation from the educational organization, resentment against school personnel, and increased association with negative peer influences (Darensbourg et al., 2010). These findings indicate inequitable treatment of Black students and suggest that biases play a factor in discipline referrals rather than students’ actual behaviors.

School Supports and Interventions Not Supporting Black Students

To counter this racial discipline gap, schools have employed strategies such as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Justice Practice trainings, which intend to provide a multi-tiered system of interventions and supports as alternatives to punitive discipline to improve student outcomes in academic and behavioral areas (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Dutton Tillery et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2020). These interventions include training students and staff on appropriate behaviors and reinforcing positive discipline while encouraging building relationships. Many studies do show favorable results in decreasing ODRs, taking the overall student population into consideration. One study showed a decrease in ODRs and suspensions and an increase in positive school climate, but only when schools implemented PBIS with the highest fidelity (Houchens et al., 2017). This particular study's sampling only included schools with 80% or higher percentage of White students, left out any disaggregation of discipline data and school climate on different student groups, and found that schools with already higher academic achievement showed higher school climate and teacher satisfaction. Another qualitative study on teachers' perceptions of PBIS found their lack of understanding of PBIS strategies, even with extensive training (Dutton Tillery et al., 2010). Although schools use these approaches as possible solutions to diminish the racial discipline gap, the strategies place the focus on altering student behaviors, which fosters a deficit view of students and ignores the behavior of school personnel and systemic inequities. Furthermore, discipline rates still prove higher for Black students even with these systems of support (Anyon et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2018; Romero et al., 2020).

Existing Gaps in Research

Multiple studies within the educational setting suggest racial bias as a variable accounting for the overrepresentation of Students of Color in exclusionary discipline practices (Applebaum, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Devine et al., 2012; Fergus, 2017; Romero et al., 2020). These quantitative approaches underscore the prevalence of racial discrimination throughout society. Moreover, many cognitive psychology studies also utilize surveys of participants that demonstrate a disconnect between teachers' explicit actions with their biases since findings show that people respond to these surveys based on social desirability (Glock & Krolack-Schwerdt, 2013; Marcucci 2020; Warikoo et al., 2016). The quantitative nature of these studies limits the potential to uncover how external discriminatory behaviors of educators and institutions affect the advancement for Black students and perpetuate harmful environments that negatively impact Black students.

Recently, a qualitative study from Howard et al. (2019) used in-depth interviews and "counternarratives" of Black and Latino males in high school as a platform for student voices. These "counternarratives" analyzed what students ascribed as factors that impacted their lives and provided insights on how to promote a supportive system from a strengths-based view. It also included ways to help students navigate the systemic inequities present in education, offered by students. Several other qualitative studies also provide insights of Black students at the secondary level; however, not many other studies include student voice and perspectives, especially of Black students in upper elementary school (Lee, 1999; Ogbu, 1994; Phelan et al., 1994). Past research at the elementary level often leaves out the experiences and reactions to racial bias and discrimination in discipline and relies on quantitative studies to illuminate the racial disparities in school discipline (Eccles et al.,

2006; Van den berg et al., 2010; Warikoo et al, 2016; Wiggan, 2007; Wong et al., 2003).

Building upon the research from Howard et al., (2019) the inclusion and highlighting of upper elementary Black students' voices may underscore ways in which to mitigate the effects of racial biases and ultimately address the racial discipline gap. Furthermore, using a qualitative study and including student voices and perspectives can increase the urgency and necessity of changing harmful actions and systems. I intend to collect data on how students experience racial biases related to discipline.

Statement of the Purpose

This qualitative study investigated how upper elementary Black students, ranging from 8 to 12 years old, experienced discriminatory practices in discipline. The purpose of my study was to amplify the voices of upper elementary Black students and it allowed me to dig deeper into the thought processes and feelings of students, which can increase the awareness of discriminatory practices by educators and institutions.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do upper elementary Black students experience discipline practices?
 - a. How do students describe their disciplinary experience by educators?
 - b. What factors do upper elementary Black students attribute to their discipline experience?
 - c. In what ways, if any, are upper elementary Black students affected by their discipline experience?

2. What strategies, if any, do upper elementary Black students utilize to cope with their discipline experiences?
3. What do upper elementary Black students suggest as ways to lower the racial discipline gap?

Overview of the Research Design

This study collected data through in-depth interviews with upper elementary Black students, ranging from ages 8 to 12 years old. Participants were selected from Park Elementary School District (PESD)² because this district has shown a decrease in suspensions and expulsions as a whole, but not for Black and African Americans, as indicated by the California School Dashboard³. Based on this overrepresentation of Black students, I recruited students from PESD for the study. Upper elementary Black participants within the age criteria and who identified themselves as Black and/or African-American were selected for the research. To capture different perspectives, I considered students from varying school sites, age, and gender.

Study Significance

The problem remains that racial biases exist and may maintain the racial discipline gap for Black students (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Smolkowski et al., 2016). Findings from a longitudinal study suggest that some Black adolescent students disengage from school and experience lowered academic motivation as a response to racial discrimination and microaggressions from teachers and peers, which also stems from exclusionary discipline

² Pseudonym being used to maintain confidentiality

³ The California School Dashboard provides information on the progress of schools and districts under California's Accountability System to improve student learning and opportunities

practices (Eccles et al., 2006). Although educational organizations attempt to reduce the systemic inequity inherent in school discipline through interventions such as PBIS, Restorative Justice Trainings, or stand-alone Implicit Bias trainings, the social context of bias-based decision making must be taken into consideration when implementing these interventions to produce long-lasting results (Anyon et al., 2018; Applebaum, 2019; Hagiwara et al., 2020). The current qualitative study aimed to provide upper elementary Black students a voice on how they experienced discipline at schools as well as how teachers' responses to these situations impacted the participants.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though educational organizations have attempted to address the racial discipline gap with various interventions, the fact remains that Black students still encounter much higher rates of exclusionary discipline practices, (suspensions, office disciplinary referrals, expulsions) compared to White students for similar infractions (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Eccles, 2006; McIntosh et al., 2018; Okonofua & Eberhardt; 2015; Romero et al., 2020). Attempting to implement tiered systems of support without accounting for biases offers a possible explanation for this disproportionality against Black students (Anyon et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2018; Romero et al., 2020). This literature review considers several quantitative studies that analyze discipline data across various districts while giving insight into how racial biases affect certain contexts at multiple grade levels. Several qualitative and mixed methods' studies also offer perspectives of how racial biases impact the educational experiences of Black students in secondary education, while making the case for extending these studies to include younger students.

In this literature review, I first discuss studies that suggest that adults' racial biases and subjectivity contribute to the overrepresentation of Black students in school discipline. Next, I provide studies that show how teachers' biases affect their external behaviors and their disciplinary decisions. Then, I explore how racial biases in discipline negatively impact a student's academic, behavioral, and health outcomes. Next, I indicate the need to raise awareness of these practices and biases to educators at the elementary level with the hopes of addressing systemic change. Finally, I outline how my study uses Critical Race Theory to argue for centering student voice as a catalyst for building awareness of harmful practices amongst educators.

Racial Bias in Discipline

As schools adopted zero tolerance policies and implemented exclusionary discipline practices, discipline data spanning from the 1970s to the present reflected a significant educational issue that disproportionately targets Black students (Anyon et al., 2018; Skiba & Losen, 2015). Multiple quantitative studies confirmed the existence of racial bias and subjectivity against Black students in K-12 (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2015; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Smolkowski et al., 2016). The studies included large samples and derived similar conclusions that teachers inflict exclusionary discipline practices at higher rates against Black students than White students.

An empirical study by Bradshaw et al., (2010) examined data collected from the School-Wide Information System (SWIS), an online database used to account for and track ODRs, along with teachers' ratings of student behavior from a sample of 6,988 children enrolled at 21 elementary schools. The study also focused on collecting data that compared the number and types of disciplinary decisions of Black and White teachers and students.

After controlling for covariates, the study found that Black students had substantially greater odds of receiving the following categories of ODRs compared to White students. The results were reported as Adjusted Odds Ratio (AOR): 1) teacher-reported ODR (AOR=1.35, $p < .01$), 2) any ODR (AOR=1.24, $p < .01$), 3) minor ODR (AOR= 1.82, $p < .001$), 4), ODR for fighting (AOR=1.26, $p < .05$). To get an idea of the magnitude of the racial disparity, an AOR of 1.82 indicates an 82% higher likelihood of Black students receiving minor ODRs compared with White students.

Similarly, Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009) administered a multivariate analysis with two years of data of out-of-school suspensions and the juvenile justice system by collecting data on Black and White youth between the ages of 10-17 in 53 Missouri counties. Their analysis revealed Black students received out-of-school suspensions at a much higher percentage than their White peers for similar infractions- 88% of Black students who committed violence received suspensions compared to 72% of White students; 95% of Black students received suspensions for weapon related offenses compared to 85% of White students; 55% of Black students received out-of-school suspensions for tobacco-related offenses compared to 37% of White students. These findings reaffirmed the discrimination present in disciplinary practices.

Further studies also pointed to Black students encountering higher rates of subjective discipline. In a national survey of more than 70,000 schools, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights reported Black students were more than three times as likely to be suspended or expelled than White students for the same infraction (Losen et al., 2015; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Romero et al., 2020; Smolkowski et al., 2016) . One particular study performed by Smolkowski et al., (2016) confirmed this

subjectivity in discipline. These researchers collected data from a sample of 45 states that included 483,686 ODRs distributed to 235,542 elementary students by 53,030 educators across 1,666 schools, utilizing the SWIS. Expert panel members, which consisted of four researchers of school discipline, labeled each ODR as subjective (e.g., defiance, disrespect, disruption) or objective (e.g. theft, fighting, truancy), and ran a series of multilevel logistic regression models to calculate odds ratios. Several notable results emerged from this study. After controlling for school-level variables (proportion of students receiving free and reduced lunch, the proportion of African American students, and proportion of other Students of Color) and taking the variability of the educator and school levels, results indicated that 88% of the ODRs were subjective. Furthermore, African American students were 1.2 times more likely to receive a subjective ODR from the same teacher from the same school than White students. The odds ratio for major subjective ODRs was 1.34 for Black students compared to White students, and further disaggregation showed that the odds ratio for major subjective ODRs of African American female students was 1.4 compared to White female students.

Okonofua & Eberhardt (2015) also confirmed the subjectivity in discipline outcomes in their study. Their experiment with a group of diverse K-12 female educators tested how racial biases and stereotypes led to harsher infractions towards Black students. The researchers created identical fictitious school records of two students with similar minor infractions, the only variation between the two records being stereotypical Black names (e.g., Deshawn & Darnell) and stereotypical White names (e.g., Jack & Greg). In their scenarios, the students demonstrated minor and unrelated misbehaviors twice. Some teachers reviewed the scenarios of the fictitious student with a stereotypical Black name, while other teachers reviewed the record of the fictitious student with a stereotypical White name. Results showed

that teachers did not feel troubled between the first and second infraction when students were White, but felt significantly more troubled when the students were Black. Additionally, teachers were more likely to label Black students a troublemaker who reflected patterns of misbehavior after the second infraction than the White student. In fact, even with the same misbehaviors as White students, teachers reported Black students' misbehaviors as more extreme than the White students' misbehaviors. Okonofua & Eberhardt (2015) sought to illustrate how psychological mechanisms impacted how teachers viewed behavioral patterns over time and the strong role race played in this development. All these aforementioned studies demonstrated the salience of racial inequities and how these biases perpetuated unfair practices that harm Black students.

Racial Biases' Impact on Attitudes and Decision

Several research studies provided seminal findings of how participants remained unaware of how their implicit biases on race impacted their explicit attitudes and decisions. (Harrison et al., 2018a; Harrison, 2018b; Staats, 2015). In 1998, researchers Tony Greenwald, Mahzarin Benaji, and Brian Nosek, developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and used this tool in their study of Implicit Biases, called Project Implicit. The IAT measures and raises awareness of personal implicit biases by detecting a person's automatic associations with groups and their characteristics. Out of four million responses to the web-based IAT, 68% of respondents displayed pro-White/anti-Black implicit associations (Nosek et al., 2005; Warikoo et al., 2016).

Researchers also utilize the IAT in measuring the implicit biases of educators since the speed-based test prevents underestimations of implicit biases and time for reflection (Marcucci 2020; Staats, 2015; Warikoo, 2016). One study used 116 pre-service teachers

(Harrison et al., 2018a) and another used 197 middle and secondary school teachers with an average range of 13 years of experience in teaching (Harrison et al., 2018b). Both studies compared the participants' explicit beliefs to their implicit biases, as measured by the IAT. The studies intended to demonstrate how implicit biases and explicit beliefs remained separate constructs by showing a lack of correlation between the two scores.

With both studies, participants displayed a positive perception towards English Learners after analyzing the explicit beliefs survey. Harrison & Lakin (2018) then categorized educators into three groups based on their IAT scores- *Negative Implicit* scores, *Neutral Implicit* scores, *Positive Implicit* scores. Both studies demonstrated the majority of participants holding *Negative Implicit* views, which reflected a lack of correlation between the positive explicit attitudes towards English Learners, which contrasted from the results of their actual implicit biases gathered from the IAT. Both studies pointed to a mismatch between educators' explicit beliefs and their implicit biases (Harrison, 2018a; Harrison, 2018b; Moule, 2009; Staats, 2015; Warikoo et al., 2016). This divergence potentially produces inequitable academic and social emotional outcomes for Students of Color.

Martin et al. (2016) contend that if teachers are provided avenues to “explicitly, and critically interrogate the historical and present-day intersections of race, culture, gender, and foster a self-reflexive engagement with difference” (as cited in Asher, 2007, pp. 65-66), teachers can engage in meaningful self-reflection on how their race, power, and privilege impact students. In this study, I aimed to share the experiences and perspectives of Black students in hopes of raising awareness of how racial biases by adults in schools play a part in discipline, which can create harmful experiences for Black students, which this literature review now addresses.

How Racial Biases Produces Harm

Multiple studies confirm how teachers' exclusionary discipline practices harm students' academic performance (Fergus, 2017; Gregory et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2020). For example, when educators held higher expectations, students achieved higher scores in reading and math, whereas lowered expectations due to teachers' implicit attitudes predicted poorer scores (Romero et al., 2020; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; Peterson et al., 2016; Van den Bergh et al., 2010). Peterson et al. (2016) defined the construct of teacher expectations as "beliefs teachers hold about their students' academic capabilities and subsequent levels of achievement" and explicated that teacher expectations significantly impact subjective judgments of students, while also impacting how they provide supports and teach students from different ethnic groups. Additionally, Brophy & Good's (1970) seminal research found several harmful responses from teachers with lowered expectations such as less eye contact, less wait time, unwelcoming attitudes, and the administering of low-level tasks. These researchers lend various data that confirm how racial biases may maintain harmful instructional practices that negatively impact Black students.

The aforementioned actions of educators also impact student motivation and generate academic disengagement, which undermines academic and behavioral performance, as many studies confirm (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Eccles et al., 2006; Johnson, 2020; Wong et al., 2003). A two-year longitudinal study by Wong et al. (2003) gathered interview data, survey data, academic grades for 7th and 8th graders, and standardized test scores from students' elementary school years of African American adolescents. One of the administered surveys asked students about their perceived discrimination from teachers on how often they felt teachers called on them less, disciplined them more seriously, graded them unfairly,

discouraged them from academic opportunities, and thought they were not as capable or intelligent due to their race (Eccles et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2003). Students also responded to “achievement motivation” scales that measured their perception of the value of the utility of school, and self-competency. The results from the partial correlation analysis revealed that African American students’ perceived discrimination from teachers were negatively related to beliefs about the importance of school (-.16, $p < .01$), utility value of school (-.3, $p < .001$), and personal beliefs about academic competency (-.13, $p < .05$). Discriminatory practices harm students’ beliefs about their academic capabilities and the usefulness of education.

Exclusionary discipline practices also harm Black students’ academic achievement in the classroom (Gregory et al., 2010; Johnson, 2020). Arcia (2006) performed a 3 year longitudinal retrospective analyses of two samples - suspended fourth to seventh grade students of similar grades, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and limited English proficiency who did not incur suspensions. The analysis further broke down the suspended group into number of days suspended: 1 to 10 days, 11 to 20 days, and 21 or more days. In the comparison, students’ reading achievement data from their state’s reading competency test were used from each school year. Data collected demonstrated a significant disparity of reading achievement scores of suspended students to non-suspended students after the first year. Additionally, although non-suspended students gained an average of 198 points on their reading achievement scores throughout the 2 years, students suspended 1 out of the 3 years only gained an average of 176 points; students suspended 2 out of the 3 years gained an average of 168 points; students suspended each of the 3 years only gained an average of 159 points. The analysis also found that students who had received no suspensions in sixth-grade but had received suspensions of 11 or more days in seventh and eighth-grade, scored lower

than fourth-grade students with no suspensions. These findings emphasize the substantial impact exclusionary discipline has on academic achievement.

Other studies offered perspectives on how the racial biases of educators caused feelings of alienation for Black students. In one study, researchers interviewed 40 Students of Color, which included Black students, with severe academic difficulties from Emerson High School - an urban school in San Francisco (Lee, 1999). Researchers selected respondents with the following criteria: (a) a cumulative grade point average of less than 2.0, (b) two or more suspensions or expulsions from school, and (c) excessive absenteeism (Lee, 1999). Questions concentrated on students' perception of how factors of school and classroom influenced their low level of achievement.

Lee's (1999) study also reflected how teacher bias prevented positive interactions and relationships with Students of Color. All respondents from Emerson noted boredom and a lack of engagement with the teacher-centered instruction. Students mentioned that teachers provided little interest and accessibility to the material, which caused higher rates of absenteeism and cutting classes. Teachers failed to take the time to explain the material to students and did not reprimand students for cutting classes. Black respondents also noted how teachers easily became mad at them and told these particular students of color to stand in the back of the class for talking, whereas Asian and White students exhibited the same behavior, but were not disciplined. When students were asked "Do you feel the teachers at Emerson know you well?" the majority of respondents could not name a single adult who showed care and interest for their academic well-being, which reinforced feelings that teachers simply did not care about the low-performing students (Lee, 1999, p. 229). These actions of teachers correspond with the questions asked in the studies from Eccles et al

(2006) and Wong et al. (2003), which discussed how students experience negative academic outcomes and lowered academic motivation due to discriminatory practices.

Students also experienced negative mental and physical health effects as a result of racial bias in discipline. Respondents in Lee's (1999) study attributed teachers' apathy and higher degree of shaming to discrimination based on race and a misunderstanding of the culture. Many Black students described the frustration around repeated discriminatory practices by teachers. One particular study examined how 867 African American children between the ages of 10 and 12 felt depressive symptoms after repeated discrimination (Simons et al., 2002). Eighty-eight percent of the target participants disclosed feeling at least one symptom of depression the previous year. Some of the symptoms were feelings of sadness (32%); decreased interest in activities (32%); grouchiness and irritability (41%); loss of appetite (44%); trouble with sleeping (42%); thoughts about death (34%); and suicide ideation (35%) (Simons et al., 2002).

Additionally, research studies have presented a strong correlation between experiences of discrimination and perceived discrimination to negative health outcomes. Researchers report that these experiences trigger stressors that increase blood pressure, elevated heart rates, and higher rates of heart disease and mortality (Gee et al., 2012; Mays et al., 2007; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). One particular study researched Black adolescents between the ages of 14-16 and discovered a strong correlation between experiences of racism and higher waist circumference and insulin resistance, particularly in Black adolescent girls (Chambers et al., 2004). These perceived biases and repeated acts of discrimination create obstacles for Black students that threaten their emotional and physical well-being.

Why Elementary School

While all of these mentioned studies point to how racial biases further the racial discipline gap, resulting in negative academic, psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes, they primarily remain quantitative. Furthermore, the qualitative studies that offer perspectives of students focus on secondary and post-secondary students, leaving out the voices of elementary-aged students, who are also discriminated against at disproportionate rates. As previously mentioned data reveals, the racial discipline gap remains an ongoing systemic issue and including these young voices may help discover ways to create equitable experiences.

Various studies and reports reveal the severe disproportionate rates of suspensions of Black elementary students beginning from preschool all the way to sixth grade. A recent report from the Black Minds Project reported that Black students in early education were 10.4 times more likely to incur suspensions than their peers (Wood et al., 2019). Another study from Arcia (2006) also illustrated this alarming systemic issue. The researcher studied the suspension history and reading achievement scores of students over the course of 3 years (n=49,327) and compared this group to peers of similar grade, gender, race and SES (n=42,809). By fifth grade, n=1,659 suspended students in Year 1, n= 1,733 suspended students by Year 2, and n=1,879 by Year 3. More alarmingly, the number of students suspended in sixth grade jumped to almost four times that of fifth grade with n=6,803 suspended students in Year 1, n=6,480 in Year 2, and n=7,200 by Year 3. The rate continued to increase and peak during students' ninth grade year with n=12,471 in Year 1, 12,738 in Year 2, and 13,082 in Year 3. A correlation exists between suspensions incurred at the elementary level with the secondary level. Finding ways to negate suspensions for younger

Black students can create better educational, physical, and emotional opportunities that impact students' lives.

To decrease suspensions, schools commonly use interventions such as PBIS or other multi-tiered systems of support, which focus on student behavior to decrease the rate of exclusionary discipline practices (Anyon et al., 2018; Losen et al., 2015). The Office of Special Programs at the U.S. Department of Education reported that over 25,000 schools across the U.S. implement PBIS. Even though studies exhibited a decrease in overall ODRs in schools implementing PBIS, Black students still face disproportionate rates of punitive discipline (Vincent et al., 2015). Vincent et al. (2015) argues, "Although [PBIS] is intended to meet the support needs of all students, its current limited attention to cultural differences in the student population and potential differences in cultural backgrounds between adults and students within a school make SWPBIS vulnerable to criticism for not sufficiently reducing racial/ethnic disparities in discipline outcomes" (p.216). Simply adopting PBIS without increasing cultural awareness fails to address the systemic issues that prove detrimental for Black students. To bring awareness and improve upon these strategies, my study hopes to capture the racial biases Black students encounter.

Another reason for including young voices in studies is their ability to reason and bring depth and perspective to situations. Hill et al. (1996) conducted a study based in Scotland and interviewed elementary school aged children from 5 to 12 years of age to explore approaches that increased children's mental and social-emotional well-being. These researchers recognized that including participants' voices and perceptions of their contexts increased the effectiveness of proposed guidances. At the end of the study, some of their student focus groups expressed they wished that adults would "stop and think about

children’s point of view, look for their feelings, and listen to what they say” (p.142). In addition, a seminal study by Helwig & Jaziobedzka (2001) sought to discover if young elementary children did understand and demonstrate reasoning regarding issues and laws of injustice, or if they just complied with all rules, based on Piaget’s developmental theory. They interviewed 72 Canadian children, between the ages of 6 and 11, and discovered that this age group considered laws and issues of injustice in a complex manner. Children as young as 6 distinguished between just and socially unjust laws and situations. Although much of past research includes these young children as objects to study, my study looks to find answers both from them and with them.

Additionally, another reason for including elementary aged students in my study is because research shows that students can detect racial discrimination from a young age (Babad & Taylor, 1992; Peterson et al., 2016). One study examined if groups as young as ten years of age detected alterations in teachers’ behaviors when speaking to high-expectancy students and low-expectancy students (Babad & Taylor, 1992). The researchers presented brief 10-second clips of teachers talking to the different groups of students in Hebrew to the English-speaking observers. This language barrier occurred to focus observations on facial expressions and nonverbal cues. All observing groups correctly ascertained which students the teachers spoke to, even with minimal context and extremely brief video clips. This study further proved how young students can detect racial biases, which underscores why my study includes these young voices.

The Current Study’s Conceptual Framework

For its conceptual framework, this study drew upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the overarching theory, as it sought to illuminate how racism and biases affect so much of

how Black students are treated in disciplinary practices. This study focused on the first tenet of CRT, which acknowledges that racism and discrimination play a large part in the racial discipline gap by educators and educational institutions. Even with the overall decrease of suspensions and expulsions using strategies such as PBIS and Restorative Justice, Black students still incur exclusionary discipline at disproportionate rates, which indicates the necessity of working through issues of race to address the racial disparities in discipline (Houchens et al., 2017; Romero et al., 2020; Vincent et al., 2013).

The study also included counterstories of Black elementary students - another key tenet of CRT (Lopez, 2003). Counterstories highlight the racialized experiences of People of Color and argue that taking a neutral stance that downplays the role of race in situations proves harmful and maintains inequality and discrimination. Proponents of CRT (Howard, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2020) argue that counterstories increase equity by encouraging institutions and individuals to deal with the effects of discrimination and combat ethnocentrism by listening to the perspectives of People of Color. The proposed study centered the voices of upper elementary Black students and inquired about what tools and strategies they think educators should implement to fight the racial discipline gap.

Conclusion

This literature review presented studies that revealed how the racial discipline gap remains a critical systemic issue that impacts Black students starting in early childhood education. Much research provides quantitative data that uncovers the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline practices and also includes qualitative perspectives of secondary students and adults. However, studies exclude the voices of our Black youth in

elementary education, who experience discrimination and biases at disproportionate rates beginning in preschool. Using Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework, this literature review centers my research on how Black students face discrimination and biases of educators in discipline while seeking to find solutions from the students to mitigate the racial discipline gap. This study contributes research that captures the challenges and impact of these students' experience that result in harmful disciplinary practices. Instead of using them as mere objects of research, my study aims to include them as part of the solution.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Multiple studies within the educational setting posit that racial implicit biases account for the overrepresentation of Students of Color in exclusionary discipline practices, but these studies lack research in methods of reducing biases of educators that produce long-lasting reductions of discrimination (Applebaum, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Devine et al., 2012; Fergus, 2017; Romero et al., 2020). As school districts attempt to lower the racial discipline gap that results in the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline, they must find ways to bridge cultural differences between Black students and the adults on campus, as the study by Vincent et al. (2015) reported. Therefore, the motivation of this study was to listen to the insights and suggestions of upper elementary Black students as this inequity begins as early as preschool. Currently, not many studies include these young voices. As a result, this study focused on Pacific Elementary School District (PESD), one of the largest elementary school districts in California, because the district produced an overall improvement in Suspension Rates since 2017 on the California School Dashboard, but revealed a consistent overrepresentation in the suspension rate of African American students

in comparison. Table 1 shows this overrepresentation between 2017-2019, and Figure 1 provides a visual on what the report colors indicate.

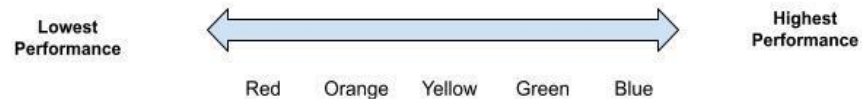
Table 1

Comparison of Suspension Rates between PESD and African American Students in PESD

	2017	2018	2019	2020-21
PESD	Yellow	Blue	Blue	Data reporting suspended due to Covid
African American	Orange	Green	Orange	

Figure 1⁴

Description of Indicators on CA School Dashboard



Research Questions

The following research questions guided my study.

1. In what ways do upper elementary Black students experience discipline practices?
 - a. How do students describe their disciplinary experience by educators?
 - b. What factors do upper elementary Black students attribute to their discipline experience?
 - c. In what ways, if any, are upper elementary Black students affected by their discipline experience?

⁴ Performance on the California School Dashboard is represented by one of five colors. See Table 1.

2. What strategies, if any, do upper elementary Black students utilize to cope with their discipline experiences?
3. What do upper elementary Black students suggest as ways to lower the racial discipline gap?

Research Design and Rationale

The qualitative data analyses aimed to investigate the experiences of upper elementary Black students regarding discipline. Interviews allow for discovery of how participants interact with their environment and this study also aimed to discover what upper elementary Black students felt and experienced in disciplinary situations as well as how they were impacted by them (Seidman, 2006). Since my research intended to provide student voice to upper elementary Black students through rich descriptions and reflections, a qualitative approach remained appropriate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2006). Taking a quantitative approach would have limited the voice and feelings of students and not aligned with the goals of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Methods

Site Selection & Population

Research shows the ubiquitousness of the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline. For this study, I selected a site that reflected disproportionate rates of suspensions and expulsions of Black students that reflected the racial discipline gap. As a result, I conducted my study with students from my current district, PESD, a large elementary school district, serving grades from Transitional Kindergarten to sixth grade, with an enrollment close to 15,000 students across 24 different schools. Black students comprise

only 1.3% of the total enrollment, but data from the California School Dashboard indicated an overrepresentation of Black students in PESD's discipline data (see Table 1).

Additionally, the most recent suspension data for PESD from the California School Dashboard indicated a decrease in suspensions and expulsions as a whole, except for Black and African American students, whose suspensions increased. This data reflects the wider issue of the racial discipline gap. My rapport with the Director of Data, Director of Special Programs, and some administrators helped connect me with students within the district who experienced exclusionary discipline.

My study involved recruiting upper elementary Black students ranging from ages 8 to 12 years, and who identified themselves as Black and/or African-American. To capture different perspectives, I considered students who met these criteria and attempted to gather participants who demonstrated a range of demographic attributes that varied by site, age and gender. I also included all participants, regardless of whether or not they received any ODRs. I also utilized my connections with various District Office Level Directors and site principals to assist me in gathering potential candidates that met these criteria.

Prior to recruitment, I completed the district's research approval process, which included submitting a Data Elements List and an application. The Director then compiled a list of students who met the criteria, excluding students from my own site where I serve as an administrator, and sent it on my behalf to the parents or legal guardians of those potential participants, using my recruitment email template. Emails were sent to potential participants explaining the details of their participation and offering the choice to opt out of the interview at any point. It also included a way to contact me if they had any questions. After the initial email, the Director sent out one more reminder email to families, excluding the ones who

responded they did not want to participate in the study, which resulted in 13 responses stating their interest. I also utilized my rapport with other principals in the district and reached out to them to assist in connecting me with other students at their sites when the initial recruitment did not acquire enough interest. With the parents who did express interest, I followed up with another email and included both the Parent Permission Form and Child Assent Form. The emails also requested their availability to assist with scheduling the virtual interviews. After this process, I ended up with 10 participants.

Because my study involved a sensitive topic with minor-aged Black students, emotional access also became an issue to consider. To provide emotional support and assurance, I indicated on the emails and consent forms an introduction to my research, my intentions for the study, and an offer to parents and guardians with the opportunity to sit in on the virtual interviews with their student. Adding these components assisted in recruitment because otherwise, I may be looked at as an outsider who might not be trusted by the students and/or their families. The consent forms also stated that I would maintain confidentiality of the students by utilizing pseudonyms to protect their identities and ensure interviewees would not be subjected to anything negative as a result of participation in the study, which provided more reassurance to students and families.

Sample Selection

I interviewed 10 participants from 8 different sites across the district (see Table 2). In an effort to gather a wider range of experiences, I recruited across 23 school sites, except for the site where I serve as an administrator. Parents and guardians self-selected into the interviews and signed both the Parent Permission Form and Child Assent Form in order to participate in the virtual interview. The upper elementary Black student participants varied in

age, grade, and gender, which helped in providing different perspectives. In order to ensure compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), I did not obtain discipline records and instead relied upon student responses during the semi-structured interviews to gather data about their experiences with discipline.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade	School
Thomas	11	Male	6th	School 1
Shirley	11	Female	6th	School 2
Ash	9	Male	4th	School 3
Catherine	11	Female	6th	School 3
Lisa	9	Female	4th	School 4
Eddie	11	Male	6th	School 5
Lamonte	10	Male	5th	School 6
Mason	9	Male	4th	School 7
Jackson	8	Male	3rd	School 6
Zayn	11	Male	6th	School 8

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred through in-depth interviews with the goal of highlighting student voice. To increase variability, students from various schools and diverse demographic attributes- gender, age, and school site- were considered. Due to potential difficulties in trying to get students of this age group to share rich details, I conducted semi-structured interviews to encourage more sharing of information and allow for flexibility in

adjusting to the different needs and personalities of students. The questions focused on student experiences, observations, and feelings regarding the disciplinary practices. I also sought to find what students perceived as reasons and factors for these discriminatory practices, as well as the students' suggestions for effective solutions that would lower the racial discipline gap that impacts our Black student population. One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory expresses the importance of including the perspectives of those who experience racism in the solutions. So often, students are disregarded in the solution, so I aimed to provide them this opportunity and voice. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the student and their willingness to share. Keeping the constraints of the pandemic in mind, interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded using my phone and tablet as an audio and video recording device. This virtual environment also provided the opportunity for the student participants' parents or guardians to sit in on the interview, if they chose. A total of six out of the ten participants' parents and guardians ended up sitting alongside the interviewees. Because the study aimed to gather students' experiences, data collection focused on student responses. Minimal notes were taken on my script during the interview to ensure I remained present and maintained eye contact with the participants.

Data Analysis Methods

Because this qualitative study emphasized student voice and perspectives, transcribing the interviews proved crucial. I wrote brief notes during the interviews that captured non-verbal cues and reminders of students' responses I wanted to follow up on, but I kept these at a minimum to remain present and engaged with the participants. To transcribe the interviews, I used a web-based service called Otter.ai. and read over them while listening

to the audio files from Zoom to check for accuracy. I then watched the video recordings from Zoom to observe non-verbal cues during the interviews.

After transcribing the interviews, I used Saldaña's (2021) guidance and printed out the transcripts and first used paper and pencil to annotate any pertinent data. Then, I read over the interview transcripts and used structural coding to form tentative categories, or "big buckets," that corresponded with my research questions and theoretical framework for the first cycle coding. Some examples of the initial predetermined codes that emerged based on my research questions were "factors attributed to discipline experience," "student description of disciplinary experience," "emotional impact of discipline experiences," "suggestions to lower the discipline gap," and "resilience strategies." For my second cycle coding, I used in vivo coding with all the transcripts as this method utilizes the language of the participants and preserves their voice, which aligned with one of the objectives of my study (Saldaña, 2021). I then engaged in inductive coding by creating categories from the in vivo codes nested under the structural codes. I initially used MAXQDA coding software. As I began collapsing the codes and creating categories from the vast number of in vivo codes, I depended on Microsoft Excel to create themes.

Positionality

Throughout my tenure as an administrator, I have regularly engaged in conversations with upper management at the District Office to advocate for equity and access for our diverse populations throughout the past couple of years. As a result, these personnel remained well aware of my stance for social justice and increasing equity and access for all students at PESD. As a principal, I constantly feel the urgency to build this vision into the fabric of my school and throughout the district. Because of my positionality, I feel safe to

have these discussions with various Directors and members of the Cabinet since one of the foci of the district remains decreasing the suspension rates of African American students. I offered a summary of findings about my research and wrote thank you emails to express my gratitude for the opportunity to conduct this study at PESD. Because people remain aware that my research interests align with district goals, it provides useful and important information that can be used to improve the organization.

However, managing my role with the students I interviewed required a shift in the management of my role. Because I work in the district I conducted my study in, it proved critical to position myself first as a UCLA graduate student and not an administrator that would use the data gathered to place the students in a compromising position with other principals. This stance, along with the assurance of researching ways to help the Black community, helped me gain the access needed to interview students. As a token of gratitude, I offered each interviewee a brief case report, thank you email, and a small incentive in the form of a gift card.

Ethical Issues

Because my study included interviewing minors, many ethical considerations arose. One of these issues was thinking through what to do if I collected negative or harmful findings. As a mandated child reporter, I considered this scenario and worked closely with the IRB and their suggestions prior to implementing this study. This situation was neutralized due to interviews being held virtually with parent consent, which also addressed the ethical consideration of gaining permission from gatekeepers. To address these concerns, I gave parents the option to sit in on the interviews. Finally, protecting the identities of these minors remained a primary concern. To further protect students' identities so that teachers in the

district did not know which students were interviewed and therefore could not subject students to anything negative as a result of participation in the study, pseudonyms were used in this dissertation and write-ups to protect these participants' identities.

Credibility & Trustworthiness

Reactivity remained a potential threat to the credibility of my current study because of my position as principal in the district and because my study focused on the sensitive topic of discrimination. As research shows, educators' explicit actions do not align with their racial implicit biases, or they respond to questions regarding race and biases based on social desirability rather than what they truly feel (Harrison & Lakin, 2003). Furthermore, the students I interviewed may have had negative past experiences with telling the truth to adults, which could have prevented them from divulging their true experiences. To counter this threat, practicing the interview process remained essential. Looking at the intricate nonverbal cues and pauses also provided rich data. Prior to the actual interview, I practiced my questions to ensure participants felt a level of trust, which helped counter this threat greatly. I have been told that one of my strengths is making people feel comfortable. Allowing for time to get to know one another and build rapport in the beginning of the interview also increased students' willingness to divulge their true thoughts. As a result, these strategies helped produce quality interviews, or what I thought were truthful interviews.

The uncertainty of being able to collect rich descriptions due to the young age and developmental stage of the upper elementary Black students posed another threat. Similar to the threat of reactivity, providing details and concrete information of verbal and nonverbal responses helped mitigate this threat. Also, although the nature of my interviews was semi-structured to allow for meaningful conversations to develop, intentional probing and follow-

up questions for various scenarios assisted in providing rich details and responses from some interviewees. For this reason, I made great efforts to concentrate on student responses during the interview so that I could ask meaningful probing questions. Accordingly, some interviewees produced rich narratives and descriptions of their experiences that produced my findings.

Study Limitations

A few limitations to this study occurred that limited the generalizability of the findings. Logistically, the number of interviews of students in the data collection remained relatively small in number. Also, the percentage of Black students in PESD remains low and the findings of this study may not relate to districts with higher populations of Black students or other educational settings.

Another potential limitation to the study may be in extracting rich data from my student sample due to either their limited understanding of racial discrimination or their lack of comfortability in sharing information with me. To address these limitations, frontloading and creating rapport remained crucial. Even with these limitations, findings from this study may add to the literature on how racial biases impact students.

Conclusion

One conviction that drives me in my role as an administrator of a public school is providing equity and access to all students. Reflecting on my past experiences of how educators treated Black students in disciplinary situations drove me to explore how the biases of educators furthers the racial discipline gap. This qualitative study seeks to provide a voice to upper elementary Black students on how they experience these unfair disciplinary

situations in hopes of finding ways to improve the systemic inequity of the racial discipline gap based on the voices of these students.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

The overrepresentation of Black students in suspensions and expulsions in K-12 institutions indicate a systemic inequity in education that produces harmful results, as mentioned in Chapter Two. The following chapter provides the findings of a qualitative study that sought to investigate the experiences of upper elementary Black students regarding the racial discipline gap- a group often overlooked in discipline studies. It also aimed to hear their perspectives on how to address the racial discipline gap. I conducted semi-structured interviews on Zoom with 10 upper elementary Black students across eight different elementary schools in PESD from November 2021 to January 2022. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to ensure confidentiality, and some quotes were edited for clarity as several students exhibited speech impediments⁵. These interviews collected data on the participants' disciplinary experiences in schools along with their suggestions to reduce the racial discipline gap, as framed by two tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) - specifically, the tenet that states that racism is ordinary and embedded in systems and structures and the one that describes the necessity of hearing the voices and “counterstories” of Communities of Color regarding the effects of racism in combating systemic oppression (Howard, 2020;

⁵ Any quotes with consecutive repeated phrases or words were edited to ensure clarity.

Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2020). Findings from this chapter answered the following research questions:

1. In what ways do upper elementary Black students experience discipline practices?
 - a. How do students describe their disciplinary experience by educators?
 - b. What factors do upper elementary Black students attribute to their discipline experience?
 - c. In what ways, if any, are upper elementary Black students affected by their discipline experience?
2. What strategies, if any, do upper elementary Black students utilize to cope with their discipline experiences?
3. What do upper elementary Black students suggest as ways to lower the racial discipline gap?

I first begin with brief descriptions of the participants to provide more context of the individuals. Using two of the above mentioned tenets from Critical Race Theory, five principal themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis. Each theme connects to the research questions with a description of the experiences of the participants using their own words as much as possible to preserve their voice. Table 3 outlines the themes with the corresponding research question. Phrases or words in quotations in Table 3 indicate participants' actual quotes of participants.

Table 3

Themes Correspondence to Research Questions

Themes	RQ 1	RQ2	RQ3
“We Get Treated Different”	x		
Cultural Barriers	x		x
Subjective vs. Objective	x		
“They Didn’t Let Me”	x		
Fear of “Criminal Records”	x		
Adults “Really Do Not Understand”	x		
“We Try to Explain but get Shushed”	x		
“They Yell at us Scary”	x		x
“Hear Me Out”	x	x	x
“Just Get to the End”	x	x	x
“Talking is Bad”	x		
Voice and “Choice”	x	x	x
Cultural Relevance	x		x
“If I got to Decide”	x		x
Resilience Strategies	x	x	x
“Always Agree With Them”	x	x	
“My Mom Helped Me out of my Sadness”	x	x	

Description of Participants

At the beginning of each interview, I informed the participants that I wanted to learn more about them to build rapport and to warm them up to responding to questions. I eased into the interview by asking “What is your favorite thing to do when you’re not in school?” Table 2 in Chapter Three details the demographic characteristics of the participants. In this section, I provide brief descriptions of the participants’ responses to remind readers of the youth and humanness of these students as the findings delve into their experiences with inequality in discipline. The more we see similarities of these students with ourselves, the

more we foster an understanding of these young Black students' experiences being different and unfair as informed by the CRT tenet on centering the experiential knowledge of Communities of Color.

In response to the prompt about their favorite thing to do when they are not in school, Thomas replied, "My favorite thing to do when I'm not in school is simply I just like going on YouTube, like getting like history and like watching like history facts. And even though I'm not in school, I still like learning like a little bit about wars." He further explained, "My dad is Black and my mom [is] White. But even though my mom's white, she's also Jewish. So, so her family lived in Europe during the Holocaust... I got a book, The Diary of Anne Frank from the library at school. I read it, it felt like that I was in the secret annex with them, like experience like that I was actually in there. And if I like read stuff about war, I feel like that, because I know how they're feeling. It makes you feel like a little bit connected with that."

Shirley shared, "I like to watch movies. Sometimes I play soccer, but not in my house. I just practice dribbling or something...my friends told me that I had a good foot, like I kick good, and I like to just stab the ball whenever we play kickball, and I never get out. I like to read because it helps me stay focused on one thing at once. Sometimes when I'm annoyed or mad, I just read because it not only helps pass time, it just makes me feel a lot calmer."

Ash commented, "I like to go to the park but most of the time, my mom, she says we have to go home. So, I play Nintendo Switch with my friends." In his interview, he later stated that he liked art, Pokémon and playing on the drums.

Catherine answered, “I like to hang out with my friends and like go outside, just like get fresh air. And sometimes I'll get on my tablet, or my computer. I'll play with my sister. And like, sometimes draw. And gymnastics. Yeah. I do gymnastics, and I take care of my baby sister and pet with my dogs.”

Lisa indicated she liked to play games and learn history “cuz I like knowing what the past and people who live before we lived.”

Eddie responded, “Favorite thing not being at school is go on to my bed, stack blankets on top, get as cozy as possible and just lay down and watch videos on my phone. That is one of my favorite things.” Eddie also shared, “I create stuff. Mostly miniature stuff because I'm a big fan of just really tiny things that seem like kind of doll sized.

Lamonte revealed, “I sometimes like to play soccer. First time I play soccer like in maybe like second grade, I had like a coach who's not like a good coach. He spent more time with the upper graders. He was not in the school, he's like a YMCA level. Maybe even below that.” Soccer makes him happy because “I get to hang out with my friends, I get exercise while doing it and it's pretty fun.”

Mason had the most expressive reactions. He began by stating he liked Legos and games. He then described the following: “I mean, I think I like drawing. Because like, I like when you just like just try and put the pen on paper and like try to visualize what you want to get there. It's kind of the final product- it's what you're always wanting to see so you put your best effort into it...Honestly, I feel like wow (slows down and says with great expression), that's what I made (points to himself). Like, honestly, like when I see the final product, I feel like it feels better than what I imagined sometimes.”

Jackson was the youngest participant who expressed his love for reading. He further explained, “Since I am actually reading at a higher level than I am supposed to be. I kinda want to read more nonfiction books to help me learn a lot more.” Minerals was the latest topic of interest.

Finally, Zayn commented, “I sometimes go out to the store with my mom, I go walking. I go walk with my mom with my dog. I play basketball. I've been playing in a team. I've been playing in a lot of games.”

Findings

Students Indicate They “Get Treated Different”

The theme of “get treated different” ran throughout eight out of 10 participant interviews, which undergirds the notion of racism permeating the daily lives and experiences of the upper elementary Black students as ascribed by the CRT tenet that racism is an ordinary experience and not aberrational (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2020). Initially, when asked if the students recalled being treated unfairly by an adult at school, all 10 participants shared they could not think of an instance. After gaining some trust with the participants and reassuring confidentiality, many began to open up about some experiences that they encountered personally or observed between other Black students and adults on staff that they attributed as unfair. The interviews suggested that students felt they were treated unfairly in various ways. Some participants, like Zayn and Shirley, described how they felt they got in trouble more than other students and received harsher consequences for the same actions. For example, Zayn noted he got “shouted” at and talked to “aggressively for kicking the ball and then told on to the teacher” by recess supervisors,

whereas “other students just get told to not kick, and the teacher is not involved.” He further elaborated on the “unfairness” of these actions by the recess supervisor by explaining that the other students did not receive the same repercussions as he did. Shortly after this example, Zayn seemed to express discomfort as he requested to stop the recording of the interview after this question.

As a follow up question, I inquired as to why these participants who shared about unfair treatment by adults thought Black students got treated differently. Seven of the eight student interviewees who remembered unfair situations did not explicitly attribute race as a factor of their differential treatment. Instead, they answered, “I don’t know,” or like Eddie, attributed the reasoning for unfair treatment to factors like their young age: “For because I was quite young. My head was in the clouds. I was only thinking of the game.” In line with this response, eight out of the 10 participants appeared hesitant to even talk about their own race. For example, when asked what race Eddie identified as, he began to spread his arms out like he was flying and went off the screen while saying, “Whee.” Then he came back on screen and said, “Hello, I just need some confirmation from parents so I’m going to be right back again,” and proceeded to “fly” off the screen again, not responding to the question right away. Others, like Zayn, looked off his screen to what appeared to be an adult, when asked how he identified himself before responding to the question. To provide assurance, I sometimes discussed my own race or described how talking about race was not a bad thing. At times, I also reminded them that their responses remained confidential and that the purpose of the interview was to gather their suggestions and experiences to help schools become fairer. After these prompts, students more willingly talked about their own race.

Although these eight interviewees did not ascribe race to their differential treatment, they did affirm that Black students received negative attention more often.

Cultural Barriers

Although most participants did not explicitly indicate race as a reason for their disciplinary experiences, five out of 10 interviewees suggested that cultural barriers created a disconnect with adults at school, which they explained led to Black students being treated differently or being misunderstood. Students described how certain qualities valued in their home and Black communities were viewed as deficits by adults at school. As an example, Lamonte shared an incident of feeling discouraged when he was benched by his soccer coach at school for “trash talking” to the other team and not being allowed to play an entire game. When asked what he wished the coach did understand, his voice raised in pitch and he looked up and exclaimed,

I like to trash talk whenever... when I'm playing any kind of family. When I'm playing with family, friends, anything. Sometimes it's not even competitive and I like to brag. That's just one of my defining character traits. I'd like her to know that [student voice starts shaking] ...It's not all like, "Good job!" Most of the winning, most professional teams don't submit after winning...or at least brag for at least five like three times on social media, during the game and when they just like they are older.

After this explanation, Lamonte's dad walked over and began massaging Lamonte's shoulders, which appeared as an attempt to comfort Lamonte while encouraging him to keep speaking. Then, Lamonte's dad walked away without saying anything. Lamonte went on to

explain that in his “culture,” trash talking happens. He expressed his frustrations and his coach’s lack of understanding and wished she allowed him to brag:

I'm getting frustrated because for some reason... even if you may do something successful, you don't get to talk about it. And you don't get to, like, say that I did something very successful. And you don't get to like, say that you did it because then you most likely will get in trouble and then you just can't brag about it.

He explicitly stated his frustrations with not being able to display his successes because adults misunderstood his culture and intentions and perceived his actions as something warranting “trouble” and discipline.

Although other students did not explicitly denote race as a reason for differential treatment, Thomas proved an exception as he did denote race as a factor for mistreatment at his site. He recalled a situation where he encountered discrimination from peers, yet he got in more trouble for pretending to punch the student who made the racial remark from the after school supervisor:

I got braids, which I still have them, and people were calling me [Tyrell] and I told them to stop but they didn't... There's this kid who called me [Tyrell]. He wanted our court. I was telling him to stop but he didn't. So like I was in line, he was still calling me [Tyrell] and I pretended that I was going to punch him but I wasn't actually going to do it. I was like “psych” (shows punching motion)...and I think he thought that I was going to punch him so he ... even though I told [the after school supervisor] that I was just pretending, technically they were worried because I could have gave him a black eye...and then and then I would have been kicked out of the after school program. [The after school supervisors], they're not like familiar that [Tyrell] is like a

Black name. I don't think they realize that that's like calling a Mexican person Juan because I don't think they knew that because I think if I called one person that I would have been in big trouble... like worse trouble than [the other kid]... She talked to them. I have no idea if she yelled at them like she did to me.

First, his peers teased him for his braids and proceeded to call him “Tyrell,” which he delineated later as a “Black name.” He then explained how differently the after-school supervisor treated him and the other student involved in this incident by “yelling” at him more than the other student who teased him. Thomas further elaborated that if he called the Hispanic student “Juan,” he felt that he would have gotten in “worse trouble” from the after-school supervisor. Although Thomas reasoned that the students and the after-school supervisor remained unaware of the racial undertones of “Tyrell,” he attributed race as a reason for these divergent consequences. He continued to provide more insight into how a lack of realization of his race by students and adults aggravated a situation:

Was that unfair? Kind of Because... Because they'll call me [Tyrell]. I don't think they realized that [Tyrell] is a Black name. Honestly, I think what the [after school supervisors] thought was like “Oh they're calling the person [Tyrell], which is not his name. Oh, that's fine. We'll have a talk with him.” But, if they knew that was a racial name, I mean not a racial name, but kind of racist, I'm pretty sure they would have been in bigger trouble if they knew that.

Thomas initially reasoned that the after-school supervisor responded with a lenient response to students teasing him and calling him by a wrong name because she did not understand that Tyrell represented a “racial name.” His tone appeared to switch as he disclosed that the students’ teasing was actually “racist” and that the adult just did not understand that it was

racist. Thomas insinuated that the supervisor's and students' lack of awareness of his culture caused this unfair treatment of him compared to his peers. These examples indicate that the upper elementary Black participants identified race and a lack of cultural understanding as factors that worsened the racial discipline gap for Black students at their sites and contributed to how Black students "got treated different."

Catherine indirectly offered another way Black students' experienced distinct treatment from adults as non-Black counterparts were approached with Restorative Justice Practices when they exhibited challenging behavior. She differed from the other participants as she could not recall unfair treatment from adults at her particular school. With Catherine, I specifically followed up and asked if she could remember a time when any student got in trouble instead. She then recalled how teachers and support staff treated a non-Black student, who she described as someone who threw "tantrums" and also knocked her water bottle down, by offering coping mechanisms to deescalate the situation:

Well, the teachers would ask him what's wrong and like calm down, calm to breathe and stuff ... They're just telling him to relax and explain to them why he was angry and asked, 'How are you feeling now after a few minutes?' Then they still called his parents and [told them] they got all this all under control.

Adults and support staff allowed for time and validated this student's feelings by asking how he felt. Catherine's example provided a perspective of how adults at School Three approached this student in a restorative manner, which underpins how Catherine described the adults at her school as fair. Her example contrasted differently from how Black students endured consequences at other schools, as the previous data suggests.

Subjective vs. Objective Reasons

Another theme that emerged from the study that supported how students get treated differently was how upper elementary Black students encountered discipline for more subjective reasons and more often than non-Black students. When asked what discipline looked like in classrooms, interviewees reported how all students routinely received citations, lost Dojo points, or received verbal redirects for talking in class at their various sites. However, as previously mentioned, eight out of the 10 participants recognized how Black students got in trouble more- especially for “talking,” “being distracted” or “outbursts,” which point to subjective behaviors. Contrastingly, the interviewees said other non-Black students were sent to the office for things such as “body shaming,” “bullying,” or “bringing matches to school,” which point to objective behaviors. Zayn detailed how a non-Black student “went to the principal's office for pushing and hitting... He got in trouble for throwing pencils and actually, he got in trouble for playing with the scissors like um, like, cutting his hair, um stabbing the paper.” The student received a disciplinary referral for objective reasons of hitting, pushing, and throwing objects.

Another way the participants described differential treatment was the frequency of disciplinary situations. Although Lisa did not experience exclusionary discipline herself, she described how the two Black boys in her class “get in trouble more” than other non-Black students. She shared how both Black classmates “Got sent to the principal’s office with the substitute. He [kept] on talking so loud and wanted the computer and the teacher... the substitute teacher said he keep on talking and he wasn't stopping.” Lisa described how this particular Black student seemed to need assistance with the computer, but was given an ODR for continuing to talk - a subjective reason. Lisa further elaborated in her interview how the other Black classmate similarly got sent up to the principal’s office for talking the next day,

even though the entire class engaged in talking out of turn with the substitute throughout the day. The substitute teacher sent a total of three students to the office - two out of the three students being Black boys. As the data analyses suggest, the interview participants identified how Black students “got in trouble more” and often got sent up to the office for talking in class, whereas their non-Black counterparts received ODRs for objective reasons. These analyses underscore the subjectivity in ODRs for Black students.

“They Didn’t Let Me”

Data collected from these interviews also identified how Black students can endure exclusionary consequences and ODRs in different ways than their non-Black counterparts, which further bolsters how they “get treated different.” Eight out of the 10 student participants shared different ways they experienced exclusion as a consequence and how adults and even peers “didn’t let me” in various situations. Although this study initially sought to find out how students experienced exclusionary discipline as a result of office disciplinary referrals, the data seemed to uncover how students incurred exclusion in other forms, such as physical isolation within the classroom, exclusion from participation in enrichment opportunities, or social isolation.

For example, Lamonte encountered exclusion in his classroom in the form of physical isolation. He described how the teacher physically isolated him by removing him to desks on the other side of the classroom when he talked to his friends, whereas other students utilized those same desks as a place to “hang out” and “play games,” which further demonstrated differential treatment from an adult. In addition, even though the teacher collectively reprimanded a group of students talking alongside Lamonte, the teacher only sent Lamonte to the desk while other students simply were told to “stop talking.” Furthermore, the other

students got to choose when to go to the area as opposed to Lamonte, who the teacher directly isolated.

Lamonte shared another “they didn’t let me” situation when asked if he recalled a time he was not allowed to do something as a result of getting in trouble. With tears in his eyes and a quivering voice, he discussed how he felt “grumpy” during one morning because he missed breakfast while looking for his friends for help, which he did not specify, but was unable to find them. As a result, he “didn’t talk at all [in morning work]” and did not participate in the group work, which resulted in his teacher taking away music - his favorite subject. When asked if any other students ever had music class taken away, Lamonte responded that he remained the only one. Furthermore, Lamonte explained how he felt the teacher treated him “unfairly” and “[wished she knew] that I didn’t get to eat breakfast,” which made it difficult for him to complete work that morning. He felt that the teacher “forced him” to try to work and “took music away” as a result of him not doing the work. As previously mentioned, although he did not explicitly attribute race as a factor, he did specify that he was the only student to endure these exclusionary consequences. These examples suggest how upper Black elementary students may experience exclusionary consequences in other ways than ODRs.

Additionally, Thomas detailed another misunderstanding at the after-school program with the same supervisor who handled the “Tyrell” situation, which resulted in social isolation from peers. Thomas recalled how he attempted to explain to the after-school supervisor that he did not call his friend, who was a girl, a boy. He continued that the supervisor “yelled” at him and assumed he teased the girl and felt the supervisor “would never believe me.” Although he attributed a lack of racial understanding by the adult to the

previous analyses, when asked why he thought the supervisor did not believe him in this situation, he stated, “She didn't believe me. I don't know why... I think she technically thought that ‘now it’s karma for him.’” This situation turned into the “worst experience” for him because of his isolation from friends, who excluded him and did not talk to him for an entire week because they thought he teased this girl. Furthermore, he continued sharing that he felt like his reputation was ruined from the after school program, even though his classroom teachers viewed him as a “good student.” He continued, “I don’t know why people don’t like me,” which seemed to further indicate social exclusion that he felt as a result of this instance. When asked how this treatment made him feel, he expressed the following: “Betrayed because adults should trust you. But when they don’t believe you, it’s just... it’s very sad.” Not only did he endure social exclusion from peers, he felt “betrayed” and alone due to an adult who repeatedly did not believe him and felt wanted “karma” to happen to him. This example illustrated a different form of exclusion Black students encountered as a result of an adult assuming a disciplinary situation.

Fear of “Criminal Record”

Throughout the interviews, seven out of 10 upper elementary Black students used language that could be associated with criminality when describing themselves or their Black peers. These participants used language such as “permanent record,” “crime,” and “ruin your life” throughout the interviews, which seemed to develop a connotation of criminality. Furthermore, these phrases suggested punitive measures used rather than restorative practices, as seen in previous analyses of non-Black students. A quotation from Thomas outlined the fear he held due to his discipline experiences:

You could do so many good things in life, but there's just that one thing like you messed up on that will ruin your entire life. And maybe not your life, but like school life or it will ruin your reputation...Knowing that this is my last year in elementary school, and like and like I'm either going to go to USC or UCLA, which I don't want to get suspended ever because I do just like a criminal record, it'll be on your permanent school record.

In this data piece, Thomas reflected on how the incident with the after school supervisor impacted his reputation. “Ruin your life” and “messed up” provided further insight into how Thomas seemed to associate his situation with negative and punitive language. He feared getting “suspended” and having these situations being put into a “permanent school record,” which he analyzed as analogous to a “criminal record.” Somehow, he developed an association between the discipline at school to the larger judicial system.

Shirley, who attended another school, used similar punitive language of “permanent record,” “bad crime,” and “innocent” and added to this perspective in her description of how a particular recess supervisor treated her:

There were a lot of kids doing something else wrong and we were the ones that actually weren't doing anything wrong. And we still got in trouble...We thought she was gonna give us a write up and that goes on your permanent record... if it's a really bad crime, then you have to go to the vice principal...Sometimes people are innocent and she doesn't hear us out.

Shirley’s description seemed to indicate feeling singled out by the recess supervisor. Giving “write ups” that went into the “system” and support staff “not hearing us out” further suggested how the adult’s response to Shirley contributed to this negative association to

criminality. Although these two participants attended different schools, they both referred to “permanent record” and “criminal.” These examples offered an analysis of how differential treatment of Black students seemed to lead to punitive descriptions by Black students.

Contrastingly, Catherine’s prior example of the non-Black student approached with restorative practices seemed to indicate how discipline practices by adults could impact the perception of Black students by adults and peers in a positive way rather than negatively, furthering the differential treatment of Black students in the school system. As Catherine described the student who got in trouble as “he’s actually very nice. He’s a very nice kid now. He still has little tantrums now and then but he doesn’t really harm anyone,” it paralleled how the adults approached the student. She described the student in restorative terms rather than punitive descriptions. Her example contrasted starkly from how Lisa described her Black peers who endured exclusionary discipline more than other students. When asked if Lisa thought the consequences to the two Black students were fair, she responded with the following: “Yea because you see they were the troublemakers. They’re always doing bad stuff.” Lisa depicted the two Black boy classmates as “bad” and “troublemakers” because they continued to engage in talking and being distracted, which resulted in exclusionary discipline and pointed to language of criminality. Students consistently ascribed Black students as recipients of “we get treated different,” which also impacted the way Black students were viewed by peers.

Students Indicate Adults “Really Do Not Understand Them”

I inquired about whether or not students felt understood by adults during the discipline exchanges with adults. The theme of how adults “do not really understand” emerged and pointed to another issue of adults approaching disciplinary situations using

punitive measures instead of implementing Restorative Justice Practices. Data seemed to indicate that adults did not provide opportunities for students to explain situations, which led to Black students describing experiences of differential treatment.

“We Try to Explain, but Get Shushed”

Seven out of 10 students mentioned being silenced when they tried to clarify these misunderstandings with adults. Eddie remembered playing tag as a second grader, which resulted in a “write-up” from a supervisor because tag was not allowed. At School Five, if a student received a write-up or “ticket,” the supervisor would notify the teacher and the teacher would deliver the consequences. Eddie described his thoughts:

I was scared. I was thinking of [what impression my teacher would have]... I haven't gotten in trouble yet... But it turns out the ticket... the teacher never told us about the ticket up front or that they just never seem to take it at all [to the office] which had me even scared because I just thought throughout the day, "Oh no no no no. When's it coming? When is [it] going to be the final blow?" I would think that the supervisor would have remembered those kids and not me. I wasn't talked to of any warning and I still got written down. And even when I try to speak I got shushed.

This data point indirectly illustrated how the teacher did not attempt to communicate with the students who received the ticket, which caused feelings of being “scared” the whole day for Eddie while waiting for the “final blow” from the incident. Even though exclusionary discipline did not result from the ticket, Eddie endured anxiety and felt misunderstood. He then indicated he “wasn’t talked to” by the recess supervisors and when he tried to speak, he got “shushed,” which led to him feeling not understood. Here, two groups of adults did not give an opportunity for students to speak - the teacher and the recess supervisor.

Shirley conveyed a comparable sentiment: “We try to explain, but sometimes she just tells us, she doesn't want to hear it because she thinks she knows what happened.” This situation also transpired with a recess supervisor. The description of “she doesn't want to hear it” appeared to connote strong feelings from Shirley of how this particular supervisor did not listen to Shirley and her group of friends. Furthermore, “she thinks she knows what happened” seemed to imply how biases played a role as the supervisor assumed the girls created issues at recess without gathering any information of what actually occurred.

Additionally, Lamonte felt misunderstood when his teacher sent him to the tables to cool down during writing time: “I sometimes write like things or like I take too long and trying to like make a sentence and most of the class is done before I write a word because I'm trying to think of a good word.” Not only did Lamonte get sent to the table for talking, he mentioned how the teacher sent him to the table if he shut down from frustration or she perceived him as avoiding work when in fact, he was struggling with what to write and “think of a good word” - not avoiding work as he said the teacher assumed.

Lamonte provided another example of how students did not feel adults fully comprehended situations in the following exchange:

Lamonte: I think... use more people to say what actually happened (Wipes nose after crying)...Like what, like the incident I told you about someone like that now to talk to someone. That's the only time they actually got other people to like, say what happened.

Researcher: What usually happens, then?

Lamonte: Well, then the person doesn't get to talk to the other person,

Researcher: What do the adults do instead of asking what happened, then?

Lamonte: Well, then they tell the other one to say sorry... And then they say that like, tell them say what you're sorry for. Like, "I am sorry for doing this ... this to you.

Researcher: So I think what I'm hearing you saying is though, they're not really understanding what happened?

Lamonte: Yeah.

Lamonte and other student participants seemed to express not feeling a full resolution from conflicts as interactions between both sides remain limited, which contradicts Restorative Practices. Furthermore, Lamonte felt that the majority of conversations simply resulted in adults telling students to apologize to one another without them gathering the entire picture of what happened. These examples provided data on how students were not given opportunities to explain and felt not heard.

“They Yell at us Scary”

Not only did students report not feeling heard, they expressed how the approaches of some adults created feelings of fear and anxiety as a result of “they yell at us scary.” Six out of 10 participants reported feeling scared when getting yelled at by adults. Lisa quoted “yelling” six times in her interview and described how the recess supervisor “just yells to them. She doesn't talk.” Mason also referred to being “shouted” at five times by another recess supervisor at his respective site. He elaborated, “It's probably the shouting. Because like, even though she's not shouting at me, like most of the time I get scared...It's a very good voice for discipline but I don't know about the result.” These students interpreted the adults' responses as “yelling” and “shouting” and questioned if the disciplinary measure was worth how it affected students.

More students offered insight into how the yelling impacted them emotionally. Six out of 10 students voiced anxiety as a response. Sometimes, the anxiety stemmed from the adults like it did with Shirley. She shared, “Sometimes I think she's coming right towards us just to get us in trouble but sometimes she passes by us and gets somebody else in trouble...Sometimes I duck.” Shirley explained how the presence of a certain supervisor caused her to “duck” and avoid interaction. The phrase “coming right towards us” seemed to paint a picture of threat. Eddie also added his thoughts on the emotional impact of being yelled at: “There wasn't really any consequences other than having maybe more than what your mind can do to you. Like be thinkin, oh, man, oh man, people are going to be mad at me. Why did I do it?” During his explanation, Eddie paused, started taking deep breaths, and then apologized for pausing. Even with no consequences from an adult, he felt the anxiety in his own mind and it seemed to manifest physically in his response as well. Eddie also worried about how others would perceive him and regretted getting in trouble. Additionally, Eddie even considered “hiding in the bathroom until the end of the day” because he received a write-up. Other students disclosed feeling other strong emotions such as “mad,” “sad,” and “frustrated” when being yelled at.

Just as Eddie’s recollection invoked a physical reaction during his interview, seven out of 10 upper elementary Black students provided in-depth data of how the yelling impacted them physically. Zayn experienced a physical response as a result of another recess supervisor at his site because he explained that the “aggressive shouting” caused his “eyes and ears to hurt.” Mason added,

I mean, [it's] like when there's like something really loud, like your brain's racing and you're like, "What's going on? I'm scared." But sometimes, like, even I feel kind of sad. Like, oh, I'm a bad person. I shouldn't have been doing that.

Not only did Mason express emotional sadness, he sensed his "brain racing" and attributed this feeling to being "scared" as a result of the recess supervisor at his site. He continued that "the way she shouts at us...makes me feel kind of like trembly." "Trembly" portrayed a picture of fear due to the shouting by the recess supervisor. All of these cases contributed to how "they yelled at us scary" impacted students negatively.

Contrastingly, some participants indicated how some adults did not yell, but spoke nicely. When I asked who Lisa's favorite adult was, she mentioned her principal because "she's really nice. And if you get in trouble, she talks with you." Lamonte also noted how his vice principal was fair because "when a student does something bad, he like comes...and he asked me for advice, and I told him about it. And he was pretty fair." When asked how this interaction made him feel, Lamonte elaborated that "it felt good. I felt like I've done something good to actually help the person." Lisa and Lamonte demonstrated how they appreciated when adults "talked" and held conversations with students. As Lamonte explained, he felt validated and affirmed. These cases provide a deeper understanding of how students are impacted by words and the tone with which the words are said.

"Hear Me Out"

Seven out of 10 interviewees implored for adults to "hear them out" to reduce the number of misconceptions in disciplinary situations. Shirley recommended the following for adults at school: "Just hearing us out and not jumping to conclusions right away...More of asking us what really happened?" Similarly, Mason "[wished the supervisor] knew more

about what we're actually doing and like who's doing what?" Thomas added, "Try to hear their side before like, yelling at them." These statements supported giving students a voice and an opportunity to explain from the perspectives of the participants.

Conversely, some participants recalled examples of adults listening to them and how it created a positive imprint. Thomas recounted how one of his favorite adults at school "Instead of being like, suddenly not knowing us or like lecturing us, she, she just told us like, okay what do you need to do?" He appreciated how this supervisor facilitated the conversation and did not jump to conclusions when a problem ensued. Instead of "lecturing," the supervisor gave students a voice. Additionally, Catherine specified how she felt adults handled situations fairly at her school "Because they walk over and talk to them personally," which further underscores the value of students being heard.

Eddie determined how soliciting input from students could produce positive changes at a school:

If they can actually ask other kids who could have seen and get more clarification for deciding on a punishment, that can help the school have other kids not have the same experience that I've had. Schools could have things that can help people get into friendlier, fresher moods. Something that will make the supervisors who are watching over us get into the mood and not be mad, but like something like to keep them calm and speak in a polite voice.

Eddie wished for other kids to not feel the anxiety he experienced. He even proposed that listening to more students would positively impact the moods of adults and supervisors because they could gain a better understanding of the situation and the students. Moreover, listening to students would result in "calm" and "polite voices" as opposed to yelling and

shouting. All these students' suggestions seemed to explain the significance of "hearing them out."

Structures in the School Create Feelings of Wanting to "Just Get to the End"

As mentioned in "Subjective vs. Objective Reasons," participants indicated receiving repercussions for talking, which resulted in Black students incurring more frequent exclusionary referrals and consequences for these subjective behaviors. Data also suggested that students felt "talking is bad," which led them to implement personal strategies of "just get to the end" to counter getting in trouble for talking. Exploring what caused these "distractions" and "talking out of turn" that led to the belief of "talking is bad" provided a perspective of how structures and policies in the class seemed to perpetuate negative disciplinary experiences for Black students in particular. Students described how policies in the classroom that targeted talking along with boring curriculum perpetuated the discipline cycle, which resulted in them employing strategies of "just get to the end," as the following data analyses reports.

"Talking is Bad"

Throughout the interviews, students described how they viewed "talking is bad" as evidenced by the many times they received a citation, write-up, or loss of Class Dojo⁶ points if they talked in class or appeared distracted. As previous analyses illustrated, various interviewees noticed that Black students seemed to obtain more instances of referrals for talking than their non-Black counterparts. This practice connects to the theme of school structures as it points to how a policy in the classroom targets talking, which remains subjective and results in Black students receiving more reprimands for talking than other

⁶ A technology tool where teachers can add or deduct points for particular student behaviors in class.

students. As an example of how interviewees described “talking is bad,” Thomas recounted how his talking created challenges in the classroom:

Last time I really got in trouble was in fourth grade. When I got in trouble in class, I think I was like talking out of turn, which like, for four years, I had a big problem with that because like, I couldn't really keep my thoughts, like, in my mind, I just said it out loud. And they weren't bad. It's just that like, I just interrupted the teacher a lot.

Thomas clarified how his talking occurred because he preferred to think aloud. As a result of getting in trouble for talking, he somehow developed the conception that his saying things “out loud” and talking, even though it seemed his thoughts revolved around the learning happening in class, caused a “big problem.”

Mason further elaborated on how the rules and policies in a classroom reinforced “talking is bad” because he associated talking with distractions:

I mean... they say it's bad to talk because they say it's a distraction and like it gets in the way of people doing work, and like I understand that. I understand that this is a distraction. But like even if they like say that, there's still going to be a lot of kids out there who are like, talking, talking, talking, talking to their friends and other stuff during class.

Here, Mason also noted how this rule created a dilemma as students would continue to talk because they simply liked to. Instead of seeing talking as a tool for teachers to utilize during instruction to prevent boredom, Mason viewed talking as bad and seemed to advocate for penalization for talking. Even his suggestions for helping students who got in trouble often for talking involved “[making] them do practice rounds or like games where they can't talk.” He suggested this silent game because he believed talking was not allowable in class and a

sign of distraction. Students like Mason and Thomas seemed to develop a conviction that talking in class was unacceptable.

Additionally, the data suggested that when teachers tried to implement talking into instruction, unclear messaging occurred, which seemed to result in another instance of unfair treatment, as described by Zayn. Zayn recollected a time he received a reprimand for talking to his partner, even though the teacher instructed students to pair-share about their learning. As Zayn spoke to his non-Black partner, the teacher seemed to single him out for talking and “being distracted,” even though she instructed partners to share with one another. :

She said like talk with your partner, and talk about how to solve this problem. And then I was looking at my desk um being distracted. And I'm talking to my friend. And [the teacher], she said, um, ‘Why are you distracted?’ Um, that I should be focusing on the lecture- on the math. And that's what got me in trouble.

In this quote, Zayn believed he was actually in the wrong for looking for things in his desk as he was trying to talk to his partner, even though the teacher directed the class to talk to one another about the math problem. Inconsistent messaging like this bolstered the conception that “talking is bad” amongst the participants.

Additionally, several other participants offered perspectives of how talking out of turn for all students, regardless of race, prompted negative reinforcements such as verbal redirects or loss of Dojo points. However, as mentioned in the prior finding, the interviewees stated that they endured differential treatment and exclusionary consequences for subjective reasons more than their non-Black counterparts. While Black students like Zayn or Lisa’s classmates were singled out or sent out of the room for talking, interviewees did not recall their non-Black counterparts receiving the same exclusionary consequences for simply talking.

Viewing talking as a deficit behavior undergirds the unfair treatment of Black students as they seemed to receive exclusionary discipline more for this subjective reason.

Understanding what positively impacted students in the classroom can reinforce how policies and structures in the classroom extended inequitable opportunities for upper elementary Black students. When participants were given the opportunity to share characteristics of their favorite teachers, they seemed to describe educators who allowed for opportunities to talk, provided choice in learning opportunities, and personally connected with the students. For example, Eddie depicted his favorite teacher as someone who “lights up. He has fun in his eyes. He would occasionally give time for students to get up and talk with friends,” which runs counter to the previous description of “talking is bad.” This data points to how rules and beliefs around talking in the classroom can contribute to the unfair treatment of Black students.

“Just Get to the End”

Four out of 10 students further described how instructional practices led to boredom, resulting in students talking, which the previous analyses illustrated led to an increase in disciplinary referrals for Black students. This theme of boredom connected to another way of how a structure in school seemed to cause students to talk more, as it uncovered how implementation of curriculum and strategies seemed to create more negative circumstances for Black students. Several students depicted the connection between boredom and talking like Mason: “So like during the boring subjects when people don’t want to pay attention, most of the time, they’re just talking to their friends.” Ash also contributed, “I get tired from learning. Maybe we could make it less boring. Make it um... add more fun subjects.” Mason and Ash offered a few examples of boredom during instruction, which resulted in talking.

Ash also added how he got “tired from learning,” which speaks to possible poor implementation of curriculum and non-engaging instructional strategies.

When asked how students tried to remain calm and avoid getting in trouble in the classroom as a result of boredom, six out of 10 students indicated countering this boredom with “just get to the end” as a strategy. “Just get to the end” seemed to signal a way of thinking to just get through the day for these students. As seen in the following data, it provided a coping mechanism as it seemed to create a mental checklist of tasks to complete to avoid trouble and a countdown to more engaging activities, such as recess, or the end of the school day. Eddie illustrated “just get to the end” in the following quote:

It can be something like, like let's see, after lunch. After lunch, I have to write. I have to do some writing, ELD, Second Step, we are done. Those tasks are going to keep me going instead of me melting like a snowman in summer. The end of the day—mostly just just don't worry about anything. Just get to the end, get to the end, get to the end.

Eddie’s use of “melting like a snowman in summer” painted a picture of students losing energy just trying to remain calm and avoid getting in trouble to fight the boredom. Rather, he said he focused on completing the tasks and trying to not worry. Similarly, Ash added the following:

Oh, it takes four hours. Yeah. Just four hours until lunch. And, two hours [from when] school starts to two hours from eight to 10:20 [until recess]. And then four hours until lunch and that's six hours of school.

Both of these students employed this strategy of counting down the tasks and the time to get to the end of the day as a way to escape boredom. This theme suggested how non-engaging

instructional practices that deemed talking as bad and learning as boring could worsen opportunities for Black students engaging with the learning, resulting in disciplinary referrals for talking.

Contrastingly, some participants described the positive attributes of teachers that increased engagement, which proposed ways to mitigate the boredom and “just get to the end.” Zayn noted his favorite teacher as someone who “makes me feel happy. She makes me feel excited about doing math ... and other subjects that we can do that makes me feel happy.” The word “doing” seemed to frame students as active participants rather than passive learners. He also declared that learning and doing math made him “happy” and “excited,” which diverged from students’ previous descriptions of boredom with school. Shirley maintained that “doing” things engaged students when she stated, “she encouraged me to do things I've never done before and try things I never have done before.” Shirley’s teacher expected her to “do” things rather than just listen and watch lectures. These quotes suggested that these students desired to learn by doing, not just receiving. These examples of trying to “get to the end” juxtaposed with commentary on students feeling “happy” when learning new things point to certain structures in class that could potentially exacerbate the racial discipline gap for upper elementary Black students, which the following elaborates.

Students Suggested Including More Opportunities for Voice and Choice

When asked how to alleviate this feeling of “just get to the end” in the class, which increased disciplinary experiences according to the participants, the suggestions of increasing student voice and choice seemed to emerge from the interviews. In PESD, less than two percent of students identify as Black or African American, and some participants indicated their awareness of the lack of representation. For instance, when I asked Jackson, the

youngest participant, how schools could be fairer to Black students and reduce discipline situations, he commented on the lack of representation of Black teachers and students at School Six and suggested the following:

Bring in a bit more people that have the same race as me. I haven't seen any Black teachers at all yet. There's not a lot of Black people in my school and I want to know some more people that are like me.

He seemed to desire to “know more people like him,” which can imply that he felt that people were not able to completely relate to him as a Black student.

Cultural Relevance

Accordingly, six out of the 10 interviewees posited that teachers should “do more interesting and fun stuff” by bringing in opportunities that were relevant to the students’ cultures. These reflections added a different set of emotions for some participants, as they seemed to smile more when discussing the utilization of curriculum that reflected their culture. Mason’s response provided insight into how bringing culturally relevant instruction impacted him:

I'm seeing in my head I'm like, wait, what? That's my race and stuff.” [Student shows huge grin and points at himself] Yeah. Yeah. I don't know. Kind of... how do I put it? Like, satisfied like, the one that makes you like do that face.” [Mason gestures with both hands up to his chin, smiling widely with a giddy expression.]

Mason’s face lit up when he communicated how discussing his “race and stuff” created meaningful opportunities and engagement in the classroom. Lisa further offered a critique of how learning curriculum that reflected her grandma’s experiences increased her interest in the following exchange:

Researcher: What is your favorite subject?

Lisa: History.

Researcher: Tell me a little bit about why that's your favorite.

Lisa: Cuz I like knowing what the past and people who live before we lived. (Lisa then smiled.)

Researcher: Is there anything specific in history that really sticks out to you?

Lisa: Maybe like the people that were like slaves... [I learned a] little bit of it at home... um like what my grandma used to live like.

The connection between school and home ignited enthusiasm in learning for Lisa. Just like Mason, she gave a smile after her response, which suggests that increasing cultural relevance in classroom practices can counter feelings of “just get to the end.” Rather than counting down to get to the end of the day, she described history as her favorite subject.

Although Mason and Lisa displayed smiles, Lamonte offered another perspective when he discussed how a teacher seemed to dismiss his cultural awareness. Instead of feelings of satisfaction, like Mason and Lisa alluded to, Lamonte described feeling frustrated due to the teacher’s unawareness of erroneous curriculum in the following:

I get frustrated, I'm writing about something I really don't understand or writing about something that is historically wrong. See, there was this thing called the Wampanoag, like the first Thanksgiving. It's like the relationship didn't last long. But then there was like a book thing, like how things were going and like the first Thanksgiving and it was not really all correct. [I told the teacher]. Well she said that “Are you sure?” because I don't think that she even knows ...I just do research because my dad makes

me do research like presidents and historical sightings. Like I know more historical famous people than people famous now.”

When Lamonte voiced his concern with the historical inaccuracies, the teacher questioned him because she remained unaware of the inconsistencies in the curriculum, which CRT defines as a way that racism remains ordinary and embedded in daily policies and structures. Furthermore, both Lisa and Lamonte illustrated how they sought out learning opportunities that were relevant, even outside of school, indicating their interest to learn. Just as students seemed to value representation and opportunities to include their voice and culture, participants indicated how they experienced exclusionary discipline when teachers did not consider the participants’ learning styles and feelings, as the next section delineates.

“If I Got to Decide”

Students also reported instances of negative disciplinary experiences when teachers did not allow for choices in displaying learning. Although these following examples did not relate to race specifically, the data seemed to indicate how these Black students felt their voices and needs were dismissed and deemed problematic by adults. For example, Ash was sent to the office in second grade because his teacher penalized him for using fingers to count on a timed math test. As a result, Ash expressed anger, which resulted in the administrators and behavior therapist removing him from the classroom and calling his mom for a conference while at work. According to Ash, he felt the teacher displayed unfairness and wished she would have understood that he was trying on the math test and needed his fingers to count instead of sending him out. When asked how school could be better for him, he responded, “I think...I just wish I could just stay in class because I still have to learn and if you get sent to the office I don't learn.” Not allowing choice in how to represent his thinking

caused feelings of frustration that led Ash to respond angrily and resulted in exclusionary discipline and a missed learning opportunity.

Additionally, Lamonte touched upon how lack of choice created negative experiences for him in his learning, especially when the teacher “forced” him to “work in groups,” which he repeatedly commented was a source of dissatisfaction throughout the interview. After he expressed these thoughts, I specifically inquired how schools could make him less sad. He continued,

Well, first way is to say what they are getting in trouble for and like not getting mad at like some people that don't like to work in groups...Yea, it was forced. She just... you don't get to pick from someone that you knew. You just hope you get a good partner and hope you get someone that you can deal with...If you get to decide who you're working with one thing or what every individual person is working on...it would [make me feel] more happier.

His choice of language of being “forced” and “deal with” seemed to epitomize how a lack of choice deterred Lamonte’s learning. He elaborated with the following: “put me with someone that was as good, someone as smart as me and put me with someone who doesn't talk so much. Not like with someone I didn't even know.” These thoughts from Lamonte illuminated how a lack of choice and teacher driven decisions generated adverse conditions for student learning due to discomfort and frustration. Just as Lamonte preferred student choice, Eddie advocated for schools to increase choice that reflected students’ interests:

I wish the school gave the students choice...Like they could have some kids do, I don't know, theater, some kids could do art. Some kids could do PE and then that way

kids get to touch on... Kids get to touch on more things. And more things than just one thing...Another thing a school could do is that they could have more activities. Eddie exuded enthusiasm at the idea of being given a choice, variety and doing “more than just one thing.” He also ended with a call to have more activities to interest students.

Students Do Have Resilience Strategies, but Rely on Families to “Help Me Out of My Sadness”

The participants referred to a variety of resilience strategies when coping with discipline and other unpleasant situations at school. As previously mentioned, four out of 10 interviewees reported performing tasks or counting down to help them “just get to the end” and avoid discipline experiences. The interviewees communicated more resilience strategies, as listed below.

Five out of 10 employed breathing techniques they learned from their social emotional curriculum or whole class lessons from the school counselors. Shirley described it as “meditation,” and Lamonte expressed, with tears rolling down his face, “taking deep breaths” and seeking out his school counselor who reminded him to breathe as well as assuring him “a safe place to talk at.”

Six out of 10 interviewees presented how they “blocked out all the noise” as a coping mechanism. Mason engaged in “tuning [the negative experiences] out of his mind” by thinking of things like “Super Mario.” Similarly, Eddie would “imagine [himself] as being somewhere else.” As noted above, these upper elementary Black students engaged in many different resilience strategies to negate the adverse experiences at school. Two unexpected strategies emerged from the data, as discussed in the following sections.

“Always Agree with Them”

Five out of 10 students indicated how they complied and tried to “always agree with them,” referring to the adults at the schools, to avoid getting in trouble. For example, Catherine consistently shared how she felt the school and adults seemed fair. Accordingly, she did not recall any situations she found unfair nor detailed any instances where she withstood exclusionary discipline in her interview, so I followed up with the question, “What are things you do that make you not get in trouble?” She offered the following response:

Well, I try my best to follow the rules. And if there's something wrong, I'll always apologize and just do what they said immediately. And I'll always agree with them and make sure [to] let them know that I didn't mean to.

The descriptors “always” and “immediately” communicated a sense of submission to ensure she did not fall into trouble. Ash similarly added, “I just do what the teacher tells us to until it's lunch time,” which corresponded with Catherine's initial answer of how she tried her best to “follow the rules.” Finally, Eddie detailed that “we were told many times that it's better if we don't talk back to an adult,” but to “always agree with them” in order to not get in trouble. To avoid negative experiences of being “yelled at,” “shushed,” and being treated differently, these interviewees seemed to react with compliance. Once again, talking is framed as negative resulting in the negation of students' voices.

“My Mom Helped Me Out of My Sadness”

One of the most significant resilience strategies that emerged was how the students leaned on the voices of their families and loved ones. A total of eight out of 10 students mentioned how they sought out a family member instead of an adult at school to help them deal with circumstances that caused them to feel upset or anxious at school. Thomas, Lisa,

and Jackson specifically recollected how they faced discrimination at their individual school sites from either a student or a supervising adult, which resulted in them “[handling] their own problems.” Jackson revisited how his classmate caused him to feel “sad” when he gagged in response to the word “Black.” Instead of telling an adult at his school of the discriminatory experience, he waited until after school to tell his mom:

My parents ...they make me feel pretty good. Even if things aren't going...They helped me by just sometimes telling me to like calm down and not get mad at that. My mom, she just help me just get out of the sadness for a while after the day...She's like I'm sorry that it happened.

Not only did Jackson’s mom calm him down, she empathized with him. After Jackson confided in his mom, she proceeded to inform the teacher of the incident via email, which resulted in Jackson’s teacher taking the two students outside the next morning and holding a restorative conversation where Jackson was given a chance to explain how the student caused “sadness” as a result of his remark. The other student ended up apologizing to Jackson and has not made discriminatory comments since, Jackson disclosed. Jackson’s mom’s request to the teacher appeared to produce a positive result for Jackson as he felt resolution.

Other students spoke of analogous cases. Shirley elaborated how her mom advised her on how to respond to the people like the supervisor who Shirley “ducked” from:

My mom tells me just to stay clear of the people that you know are bad and do bad things... My mom, well sometimes she tells me this every day. She says you are a star and you need no one to shine...It makes me feel like she truly loves me.

This data pointed to how Shirley found comfort, love, and affirmations from her mom when she felt the opposite at school. This comment also noted that Shirley’s mom reminded her of

being “a star” daily, which seemed to imply that Shirley experienced these negative experiences on a daily basis, as the CRT tenet on racism as ordinary describes.

Eddie’s and Thomas’ responses further underscored how they leaned on their parents as a resilience strategy. When speaking of his family, Eddie explained “They have done excellent. They have thought of almost like half of any scenario that can possibly happen.” His parents helped him remain calm because they frontloaded him with “scenarios” of what could occur at school. Thomas also specified how his parents prepped him: “They've told me that like in life, you're not always going to get your way and that you have to experience these things, which helped me but I don't know about other people. But to me it helps.” Both Eddie and Thomas appeared to appreciate their parents’ unique perspectives as they relayed how the participants would face negativity at school. Instead of turning to adults at school, these interviewees trusted other Voices of Color in their circle, who the students knew had faced adverse conditions and could provide trusted, relatable advice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter offered perspectives of how upper elementary Black students experienced discipline and discriminatory practices at their various schools. It uncovered instructional practices and structures in the classroom that create inequitable systems of discipline that perpetuate the racial discipline gap while describing the social, emotional and academic impact on the participants. This study also proposed suggestions from the interviewees on how to counter the racial discipline gap and noted how they developed resilience strategies at a young age in the school system. In Chapter Five, I further explore these findings and discuss the connections to the research presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five also delves into a discussion of the limitations, implications, and future recommendations as a result of this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

“I would just love to say that I hope that the world should change. Hopefully it will change because of a lot of experiences, they're horrible and I don't want to experience them again, and I don't want other kids to feel the same way.”

- Thomas, Age 11

Thomas, one of the sixth-grade participants of this study, captured one of the purposes of my research- to bring awareness of how disciplinary practices impacted Black elementary students by listening to their perspectives. As Devine et al. (2012) suggests, understanding the impact of biases on underrepresented groups can produce long-term reduction of biased and discriminatory actions. Extensive research already exists on the racial discipline gap and how Black students incur exclusionary discipline at disproportionate rates (Anyon et al., 2018; Skiba & Losen, 2015.) As such, the goal of my study was to build upon previous research by gathering the voices and perspectives of how upper elementary Black students experienced and interpreted discipline in their contexts, as not much literature offers data that captures these valuable young voices. Both quantitative and qualitative studies already conducted primarily focus on how this inequity impacts students at the secondary and post-secondary level. Although much quantitative research offers data on the dire rates of exclusionary discipline beginning in early childhood education for Black students, limited

literature investigates the qualitative experiences of young Black students at the elementary level, even though the number of suspensions spike by sixth grade (Arcia, 2006).

Another goal of this qualitative study was to gather input through these semi-structured interviews with upper elementary Black students on how to reduce the racial discipline gap. In this dissertation, I described various suggestions students offered as well as resilience strategies utilized by students to cope with the regular, daily experiences of being a young elementary Black student. This dissertation highlighted these students' perspectives and led me to findings that discussed how they dealt with discipline at their respective sites. In this final chapter, I discuss how these findings expand on past studies, the implications for classroom practice, the limitations of the current study and school wide policies, and recommendations for future research.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This study sought to understand the racial discipline gap using Critical Race Theory as its theoretical framework. Although these upper elementary Black participants varied in age, gender, grade, and school site, the data pointed to a collective experience of these individuals that reflected several tenets of Critical Race Theory. Looking at the findings from the lens of CRT informed how these young students seemed to be working against a system not made for them to succeed, no matter how much they tried. As the findings unfolded from the data analyses, it revealed how upper elementary Black students experienced discrimination from so many angles- adults, peers, and discipline policies – which speaks to the tenet of racism as a daily, ordinary experience for students. These different elements that added to differential treatment and racialized experiences also presented how schools remain a structurally inequitable place for Black students to learn in.

As this study also relied upon the last tenet of CRT by elevating Voices of Color, it also brought to light how these young students challenged the dominant deficit framework that viewed Black students as lacking the tools to succeed in school. Instead, it illuminated the experiential knowledge of the participants of the structural issues that either unconsciously or explicitly target them, alongside the many resilience strategies utilized as they go through school. However, at some point, we must stop asking our Students of Color, particularly our Black students, to be resilient. Rather, as educators, we must ask ourselves how we can push back on some of the structures that have normalized this systemic inequity so that we can truly create a place of safety. To understand the depth of what the upper elementary Black students endure on a daily basis, one must keep these tenets of CRT in mind while interpreting this study's findings.

Racial Bias and Subjectivity in Discipline

Extensive research on racial bias and subjectivity in discipline practices that negatively impact Black students already exists. These include many quantitative research studies on the racial discipline gap of Black students beginning in early childhood and how Black students incur more ODRs for subjective reasons (Arcia, 2006; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Smolkowski et al., 2016; Staats, 2015; Wood et al., 2019). Additionally, qualitative studies have offered the insights of Black students beginning in middle school to the postsecondary level and how exclusionary discipline practices impacts these students emotionally and academically (Lee, 1999; Ogbu, 1994; Phelan et al., 1994). Other studies have confirmed the racial discipline gap by exploring the subjective reactions of educators that produce higher rates of exclusionary discipline for Black students (Marcucci, 2020; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Staats, 2015; Warikoo, 2016). The current study extended the

scope of previous studies by providing a deeper understanding of how upper elementary Black students experienced discipline, and how they were impacted by exclusionary discipline in schools.

The findings of this study suggested that Black students, even at a young age, were able to distinguish unfairness in discipline practices and how they “got treated different” than their non-Black counterparts due to cultural barriers between themselves and the adults in schools. Lamonte expressed his frustrations with how his classroom teacher and school soccer coach framed his talking and qualities from his culture as deficits, which discouraged him. Anthony also discussed feeling disheartened by the lack of understanding of the racial connotations behind the name-calling of “Tyrell” by the after-school supervisor and his peers. Although most interviewees did not explicitly state race as a factor when asked what factors led to these microaggressions by various adults and peers, students’ responses seemed to point to their recognition of differential treatment compared to other students in regard to discipline. As schools strive to close the discipline gap that impacts our Black students disproportionately, acknowledging upper elementary Black students’ capabilities of detecting bias and discrimination remains significant as studies have shown that repeated exposure to discrimination results in negative academic, psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes for students (Eccles et al., 2006; Gee et al., 2012; Lee, 1999; Mays et al., 2007; Simons et al., 2002; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Wong et al., 2003). This study confirmed previous studies’ findings of how students were able to distinguish bias and discrimination at the elementary level and built on these findings by gathering personal experiences of these young Black voices (Babad & Taylor, 1992; Peterson et al., 2016). As the study by Vincent et al. (2015) reported, attempting to lower the racial discipline gap without increasing

cultural awareness fails to address the systemic issues that prove detrimental for Black students. Considering student voices and stories of upper elementary Black students can potentially bridge this lack of understanding by adults of students' cultures, which students in the study explained created barriers to fair treatment.

The current study also discussed how Black students experienced exclusion at schools in more ways than just suspensions and expulsions at the school wide level, and in different ways than other student groups. The theme of "they didn't let me" reported how the participants faced social exclusion from peers, physical isolation in classrooms that did not get reported in school wide data, and denial of enrichment opportunities, such as soccer and music, which some participants reported their non-Black counterparts did not experience, based on the participants' own perceptions. Currently, the research on the racial discipline gap focuses on office disciplinary referrals that result in suspensions and expulsions and does not include these other forms of exclusion (Skiba & Losen, 2010; McIntosh et al, 2018). Looking at the different ways the Black student participants reported experiencing exclusion other than ODRs is significant as it suggests that they are subjected to additional forms of exclusionary discipline than the previous studies report. As schools focus on reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions to reflect positive indicators on the California School Dashboard, this study's findings point to the importance of considering how these other ways Black students endure exclusion contribute to the racial discipline gap and even the opportunity gap, both of which perpetuates the systemic inequity Black students face that impact the trajectory of their lives, such as the increased probability of becoming involved in the "school to prison pipeline" (Anyon et al., 2018; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Skiba & Losen, 2010). Additionally, participants described feelings of anxiety, fear, and frustration as a result

of these other forms of exclusion, which previous studies connect to lowered academic progress and lowered motivation (Darensbourg et al., 2010; English et al., 2020; Eccles et al., 2006). This finding remains significant as schools can utilize this qualitative data to develop an awareness of how Black students incur these different ways of exclusionary discipline that yield negative effects, which can inform the creation of intentional protocols within the classroom and schools in hopes of reducing these instances of biases (Devine et al., 2012; Romero et al., 2020). As mentioned before, these data pieces speak to the CRT tenet of how racism is a daily, ordinary experience for Black students, as they face feelings of otherness and repeatedly face exclusionary consequences in different ways than their peers. While evaluating these students' data, it also pushes back on viewing Black students with a deficit perspective as these findings reveal how structures, policies, and actions of peers and adults at schools contribute to inequitable experiences for Black students.

The Negative Impacts of Punitive Practices

As the theme of “hear me out” occurred throughout the study, findings suggested how upper elementary Black students in this study received punitive measures that impacted them negatively. Many scholars have argued how utilizing PBIS and Restorative Justice Practices can decrease ODRs for the entire school (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Dutton Tillery et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2020). However, extensive previous literature have also demonstrated how discipline rates still prove higher for Black students even with the implementation of these strategies. Even as schools implement these multi-tiered systems of support, one can infer that Black students in elementary schools do not seem to be benefactors of these strategies, as some participants in the study described (Anyon et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2018; Romero et al., 2020). The themes of “hear me out” and “we try to explain, but get

shushed” further illustrated this discrepancy in treatment of Black students. The participants consistently indicated how adults formed misconceptions about what actually occurred prior to them getting in trouble - by simply not listening to the students’ explanations and voices and assuming what happened.

Furthermore, the way the interviewees described their experiences using language of criminality across different sites pointed to how upper elementary Black students experienced discipline in punitive ways. As many previous studies point to a strong correlation between the disproportionate rates of disciplinary referrals for Black students in schools to high rates of incarceration for the Black community, this finding illustrated how students seemed to form an association between school and the justice system at such a young age because of their treatment. This connection points to how biases and punitive treatment by school personnel may be leading to feelings of disengagement and anxiety in Black students, exacerbating the racial discipline gap and expanding understanding of its impact.

As Black student participants noticed the divergent treatment in various ways, findings also revealed the negative social and emotional impact on Black students as a result of these punitive practices. Thomas’s example of being called “Tyrell” and being yelled at more by the after-school supervisor for pretending to punch the student who yelled the discriminatory remark bolsters this finding. He brought up this example several times and as he got more settled in the interview, he defined this instance as “racist.” He further revealed how the after-school supervisor focused on how Thomas’s actions could have harmed the other student instead of holding a restorative conversation between the parties to discuss how the other student’s discriminatory remarks angered and hurt Thomas. Thomas repeatedly

went back to this example throughout his interview, which seemed to imply how much this discriminatory experience created a negative lasting impression on him. He went on to discuss how another misunderstanding that involved him making a remark to another friend that led to a misunderstanding with the same after-school supervisor resulted in other students ostracizing him, which he described as the worst week he experienced. The way the after-school supervisor dealt with Thomas affected how other students treated him, which also led to negative emotional effects and social exclusion.

Similarly, Lisa demonstrated this troubling outcome of social exclusion and labeling when she described her Black classmates as “troublemakers” after they received ODRs. This result indirectly corresponded to the findings in the research performed by Okonofua & Eberhardt (2015), which discussed how educators labeled Black students as “troublemakers” after observing multiple minor infractions by Black students, which contrasted from how they responded to the same infractions by White students. My study suggested that students engaged in this similar psychological mechanism of viewing behavioral patterns over time with a racial lens that affected how they viewed their Black peers. For example, Lisa formed negative views about her Black classmates after observing them involved in multiple minor behaviors of talking and being distracted, and she went on to describe how she believed that the adults imputed fair consequences on her two Black classmates because they talked constantly. Lisa’s depiction of her two Black classmates as “troublemakers” paralleled how adults treated them for these minor infractions of talking. Along the same lines, Catherine and Jackson’s vignettes affirmed this parallelism when they described how their non-Black peers who demonstrated challenging behaviors were approached with Restorative Practices and referred descriptors such as “He’s a nice kid,” “He doesn’t harm anyone,” or how “He

just was not informed.” Another way these examples exhibited this correspondence was when Lisa used this language of criminality when describing her two Black classmates, who did not do anything directly to her, which contrasted from Catherine, who ended up with a dented water bottle from the student throwing a “tantrum,” and Jackson, whose classmate made discriminatory comments about the color Black. Even though Catherine and Jackson’s peers directly affected them, they extended grace upon these students and viewed them in a positive, forgiving light. This juxtaposition suggests how adults’ utilization of punitive approaches can frame how other students think of their peers. This study also connects to the CRT tenet on how Black students experience racism in their daily lives, even amongst their peers, which unfortunately ends in more adverse experiences in school for them.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Choice

This dissertation found that classroom structures affected Black student participants experiences in their classrooms, which resulted in them enduring discipline for these subjective behaviors of talking or being distracted. When asked what led to these feelings in the classroom, students described instances of “watching [the teacher] do the work” and “lecture,” which seemed to infer students not being active participants in learning as instruction focused on teacher-driven instruction, which resembled the findings shared by secondary students from previous studies (Eccles et al., 2006; Lee, 1999; Wong et al., 2003). This lack of engagement underscored why students stated they felt the need to countdown the day and “just get to the end.” Furthermore, past studies showed how discriminatory practices harm students’ beliefs about their academic capabilities and the usefulness of education, so listening to students’ suggestions remains important to counter both the racial discipline gap

and the opportunity gap (Eccles et al., 2006; Howard, 2020, Ladson-Billings, 2006; Wong et al., 2003).

As one of the CRT tenets states the importance of elevating Voices of Color to mitigate systems of oppression, my study focused on giving upper elementary Black students the opportunity to voice their insights on how to reduce the racial discipline gap. The theme of “if I got to decide” emerged as a suggestion from students, which described giving students choices in the classroom. As Eddie described one of his favorite adults as someone who let students talk and gave choices, Lamonte conveyed frustration with his teacher because he felt “forced” to work with students that he did not feel a connection with. Lamonte further implored for the teacher to group him with students that were “as smart as [him],” which also seemed to signal how the teacher may have held low expectations towards Lamonte. Ash also discussed how he was sent to the office because he displayed frustration when the teacher did not allow him to use his fingers as a strategy to solve math problems on a timed math test. When examining these incidents, it appeared that Lamonte and Ash faced barriers to learning because their choices and voices were taken away, even though they expressed wanting to learn and attempted to complete the tasks given in the classroom. These instances shed light on how pedagogical practices that neglect student-centered instruction can cause disciplinary situations to appear as if Black students did not want to engage in the learning, or that Black students displayed defiance for not following the way the teacher directed. In contrast, participants in my study offered a different perspective that informed how students strived to learn, but felt their voice and choice stripped away, which impeded their learning. This finding speaks to the negative emotional and academic impact of not giving voice and choice to students and how shifting instructional strategies to provide

student-centered instruction can increase engagement in learning while creating social emotional safety

Students also suggested including culturally relevant curriculum during instruction, which underscores the significance of student-centered instruction. When I asked the Black student participants how it made them feel when they saw their culture reflected in class, the responses proved positive, as evidenced by the smiles that appeared on students' faces. These comments and nonverbal cues from students aligns with the importance of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy to counter feelings of “just get to the end” and decrease the racial discipline and opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Throughout the interviews, a counternarrative also developed as the interviewees added how they enjoyed learning and desired to learn. In doing so, students also challenged the dominant deficit theory that portrays Black students as unsuccessful in school due to something lacking within the group. Rather, the students expanded on their thirst for learning and spoke to how they researched their interests and passions outside of the classroom, which countered the dominant deficit theory and reflected another tenet of CRT. All participants discussed their favorite subjects and how delighted they felt when they understood new concepts. Ash poignantly stated how he wished teachers would stop sending him out of class because he wanted to learn. Students like Lamonte, Thomas, and Lisa gave examples of how they researched topics of their own interest outside of the classroom, which undergirds this counternarrative. However, due to a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and choice in the classroom, many participants expounded upon increased instances of discipline as teachers penalized students who appeared distracted and resorted to talking, while also inflicting exclusionary disciplinary consequences at higher rates towards Black students, as noticed by

the participants. These suggestions from the student participants highlight the importance of student-centered instruction in both pedagogical practices and curriculum. Considering these counternarratives that emphasize voice and choice centers students in the instruction, which could potentially result in lowered discipline rates and higher engagement in the classroom.

Resilience Strategies

This study aimed to amplify the counterstories of Black students by investigating resilience strategies utilized as coping mechanisms when facing biased and subjective disciplinary situations at schools. Many of the strategies pointed to mindfulness activities, such as taking deep breaths or thinking of things that brought them comfort. These strategies resulted from lessons and discussions with school counselors, which points to the importance of social emotional supports in the school as previous studies have indicated how repeated instances of discrimination led to various depressive symptoms such as loss of appetite, sadness, or disinterest in activities (Simons et al, 2002).

The findings also indicated how students “handled their own problems” instead of seeking out adults at school to resolve or assist with conflicts and unpleasant situations. This strategy seemed to point to how Black students may have felt uncomfortable with approaching adults at school, beginning at the elementary school level. Jackson, the youngest interviewee, even suggested hiring more Black teachers when I asked how to make schools fairer. His recommendation seemed to imply his desire for people who looked like him and could relate to him more, and his discomfort with approaching adults at school when dealing with discriminatory experiences. Instead of seeking out adults at school, most of the participants sought out the help and comfort from close relatives and family members whenever negative situations arose at school. Some student participants also displayed their

trust and dependence on family during the virtual interviews, as evidenced by how often they looked to their parents or the adults off screen before responding to my questions about their unfair treatment. As students look to familial relationships to counter against the negative effects of discrimination, it leaves schools to wonder how to build trusting relationships with Black students and how to become a resilience strategy itself that students can depend upon, rather than the cause for Black students needing to utilize various resilience strategies.

These resilience strategies also support a growing body of literature aimed at viewing students from an asset based lens. They highlight how students can solve situations individually with mindfulness strategies they learned, or how they can resolve conflicts with peers as they “handle their own problems.” “My mom helped me out of my sadness” further reveals the importance of family and how their familial connections comfort them the most when they face discrimination at schools. Instead of merely focusing on the behaviors of Black students that lead to exclusionary discipline, which imply the need to change the behavior of Black students, listening to how young Black students employ resilience strategies frequently highlights their strength while also revealing how they must depend on this strength far too often (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Implications

Implications for Classroom Practices

My hope in conducting this study was to amplify the voices of Black students that would allow schools and educators to engage in meaningful self-reflection on how their own race, power, and privilege impacts Black students. Martin et al. (2016) contend that raising awareness of how racial biases can create harmful experiences for Black students can lead to more long-lasting change in organizations. The findings from this study suggest that

educational organizations can help counter the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline by implementing several instructional strategies and practices in the classroom to alleviate feelings of boredom and “just get to the end.” First, as these upper elementary Black participants proposed: incorporate strategies that allow for talking. Mason reasoned that even though teachers expect students to not talk, students enjoy talking and will not stop, which unfortunately leads to students getting in trouble and Black students receiving higher rates of this trouble. Instead of viewing talking as a deficit, incorporating opportunities that allow for student talk and collaboration can minimize the negative feelings teachers may feel in the classroom as they teach while engaging students during content instruction. Additionally, student-centered instruction occurs as students become active participants in the learning and teachers become more of the facilitators of the lessons in the classroom.

As Ladson-Billings (1995) explained the benefits of implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Black students advocated for this option as well in my study and pleaded for more “fun and interesting stuff.” Interviews with some of the participants revealed students’ growing awareness of their own race and how the current curriculum represents, or misrepresents, their culture, yet teachers remained unaware. As parents of the students encouraged their children to research and learn more about their cultural backgrounds, students began developing more knowledge about how the current school day omitted these opportunities. Whenever the teachers did create space for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, the interviewees expressed their satisfaction. In the same way, whenever students indicated how teachers dismissed inaccuracies in curriculum, they felt frustrated. As many studies have shown, exclusionary discipline and repeated discrimination resulted in lowered motivation

and lowered academic achievement for Black students (Darensbourg et al., 2010; English et al., 2020; Eccles et al., 2006). In order to decrease the opportunity gap, educators must engage in meaningful opportunities for students that centers students, which can accordingly reduce the racial discipline gap.

Both of these implications for practice in the classroom point to giving space for students to have a voice. Voice includes allowing students more opportunities to talk during instruction to engage them in the learning while reforming the classroom practices to prevent penalizing students for talking. The other way to highlight voice involves empowering students by giving them choices and including their interests and culture within the curriculum. Finally, voice includes allowing for students to share about their experiences with discrimination and feelings of unfairness. Teachers can create these brave spaces in their classrooms where students can become more aware of diverse experiences, reflect on how discrimination impacts our youth, and build empathy and understanding across student groups and amongst adults. Allowing for students to talk and process through these experiences can increase feelings of connectedness and also help teachers pinpoint if more mental supports are needed for students. As schools implement more social emotional learning opportunities, explicit conversations about race must occur and can in these brave spaces. All of these suggestions highlight the significance of listening to student voices with an asset based lens in the classroom.

Implications for School Wide Practices

Just as elementary aged children in the Hill et al. study (1996) stated, “Stop and think about children’s point of view, look for their feelings, and listen to what they say,” upper elementary Black students in PESD pleaded for adults to “hear them out.” In disciplinary

experiences with Black students, some adult practices proved punitive which leads to the recommendation for schools to evaluate policies that result in the overrepresentation of Black students in a punitive way. This can include discipline policies, tardy policies, dress code policies, homework policies, or something as detailed as how Class Dojo points are distributed or taken away. The findings disclosed how Black students felt quite the opposite of being heard, especially in disciplinary situations. Many participants felt unfair treatment as they received harsher consequences than other non-Black students for the same actions without the chance to explain what was happening. When asked what the participants wished the adults knew as the students got in trouble, many of them explained how they were responding out of frustration from other students bothering them or frustration with not understanding the learning. Based on the data, it seemed that adults jumped to conclusions and did not give students a space to explain. Examples from Catherine and Jackson disclosed how adults effectively deescalated situations with non-Black students using a restorative approach. Many previous studies show the effectiveness of reducing exclusionary discipline in schools with the implementation of PBIS and Restorative Justice strategies (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Dutton Tillery et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2020). It seemed from the examples that staff such as counselors and teachers remained aware of these tools, yet recess or after school supervisors resorted to more punitive approaches. Schools must build an awareness with the adults of how Black students are treated more punitively than other student groups, including how their structures contribute to this problem, and also consider these additional ways Black students experience discipline remain unaccounted for. Building awareness can increase instances of students feeling heard, which can decrease misunderstandings and exclusionary discipline that negatively impact our Black students.

Another suggestion from student participants was to hire more Black teachers and leaders. Jackson specifically recommended a change in this hiring practice as he desired to “know some more people that are like me.” He recognized that not many Black students or teachers attended his school and his comment implied a desire for connectedness schoolwide. As Wittrup et al. (2019) conclude in their study, providing access to mentors for Black students can counter the effects of racial discrimination and increase academic motivation as students develop racial pride. As student diversity increases in schools, with Black and Latinx students comprising 40% of public school enrollment since 2011, the composition of the teaching force remains homogeneous: over 80% white and 84% female (Fergus, 2017). Diversifying the selection of staff and hiring practices can positively impact the organization by increasing students’ feelings of connectedness, which also increases academic achievement. I once observed how Black students responded when another Black guest speaker arrived in the class. One particular student stood out in my mind. As the teacher spoke about the lesson, his eyes lowered to his desk. But, when he saw this Black leader enter the room and say hello to the students, his eyes looked up and his mouth opened wide and he waved hello vigorously. The students' eyes lit up. Representation matters, and it will help our Black youth and organizations.

Throughout the interviews, students shared resilience strategies they learned from various social emotional curriculum and lessons from school counselors such as taking deep breaths, counting down, or thinking of things that make them feel happy and safe. Their reliance upon these strategies reflects the importance of providing mental health support for students. As districts and school sites struggle with the racial discipline gap and its correlation to student academic achievement, providing social emotional support through

counselors and curriculum that focuses on mindfulness and wellness can benefit not just our Black students, but the entire organization. Eddie even recommended having adults participate in these lessons and supports to improve the school environment so that the calmness transferred to the adults.

Creating Space to Discuss Racial Identity

Finally, one of the unexpected findings occurred when I observed students' hesitancy with revealing their own racial identity and how their race potentially impacted student discipline. As I openly shared about my own racial identity, ensured confidentiality, and explained how diversity is natural and a beautiful thing, participants began to open up about their experiences and how they relied on their families to provide guidance and comfort with issues of discrimination and race at schools. This data illustrated that if students are given the assurance and space to discuss racialized experiences, and adults are trained on how to provide this student-centered opportunity, it may increase students' trust in the adults at school, which can also create more connectedness for students. When considering social emotional health and mental supports for Black students, schools must give students opportunities to talk about their race and culture to mitigate the negative impacts of negative discipline experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for future research emerged from this study. First, additional research should include more qualitative studies on upper elementary Black students and their experiences with discipline. As previously mentioned, not many studies exist that amplify the important voices of our young Black students, even though they undergo unfair discipline practices that perpetuate systemic inequities throughout the rest of

their educational path. Data collection should include a broader range of schools as my study only investigated one suburban district with a very small Black student population. It could also include observations of various interactions between students and adults in the data collection. Case studies could examine schools or organizations that have shown improvements in the discipline rates of Black students and the strategies used as well. Interviewing students at the institution would provide a deeper look into how the practices affect the students.

Additional research could further investigate the different types of exclusions students face as consequences. As noted above, the racial discipline gap reports data collected from ODRs that result in exclusionary discipline. It does not include how students may experience other forms of exclusion. This kind of study can provide a deeper look into school practices that not only worsen the racial discipline gap, but impact academic achievement as students spend less time in the classrooms or lose out on enrichment opportunities.

Future research should also examine the impact of exclusionary discipline on parents. As schools call parents to leave their homes or work to pick up their child from the office for ODRs, it impacts parents financially and emotionally. Multiple studies have already shown the correlation between racialized experiences and its negative impact on mental and physical health, so studying this occurrence can lead to a better awareness of how exclusionary discipline impacts Black communities on a more systemic level.

Limitations

A potential limitation was the issue of reactivity from some participants. Being of minor age and on Zoom, some of the participants had their parents or relatives alongside them. I noticed that these particular students often glanced at these adults before responding

to some questions about their experiences. Another student would pause briefly whenever his parent entered the room, which could have influenced his response. Because my study relied solely on interviews for data collection, I had to refer to the students' responses and for most participants, it took multiple prompts and rewording of questions to have them reveal any unfair experiences. I also wondered if some students altered their answers in front of the adults in the room just in case the adults did not know the extent to how much trouble the child received in school, which reinforces how reactivity proved a limitation in my study. Along the same lines, students' discomfort or ability in discussing their racial identity may have impacted their discussion of discipline practices.

Also, my positionality as a principal in the same district as these participants may have prevented initial trust and rapport as students and families may associate administration with negative experiences with discipline. Initially, all students indicated they did not experience unfair discipline interactions at school. Only after I began reiterating confidentiality, many started to share about their unfair experiences more openly. As an educator for many years, I used my knowledge of how to make students feel safe and welcomed to encourage more honest responses, which also resulted in the interviewees answering more openly about their feelings and perspectives.

Conclusion

I initially sought to investigate the experiences of upper elementary Black students as I noticed how this particular student group got sent up to the office more often than their non-Black counterparts, even though the Black students comprised only 1-2% of the student population at my site. When PESD announced how the district data on the California School Dashboard mirrored this overrepresentation, I became really interested in addressing this

systemic issue. Furthermore, as I transitioned into my current role as the principal of an Online Independent Study School, I have observed a number of Black families transferring out of their brick and mortar schools and enrolling in this option post-pandemic. As I spoke with families about their reasons for leaving the traditional school setting, some discussed how their students were able to learn more at home because they got in trouble less during distance learning, which leads one to infer that Black families may be seeking alternative schooling options due to their negative experiences with discipline at traditional schooling options. Throughout my years as an educator, I also learned how giving opportunities for students to choose and voice their concerns deescalated situations while restoring students back into the school environment, whereas punitive approaches aggravated results. All of these personal accounts led me to conduct this study, with the hopes of finding ways to alleviate the racial discipline gap that continues to occur in the district and the larger educational system.

As my study's findings suggested that upper elementary Black students noticed they received punitive consequences more often than other student groups for similar behaviors, it caused me to reflect on how I can help improve these inequitable conditions for Black students in my organization, particularly in the implementation of Restorative Practices and PBIS. As schools implement these programs to improve student outcomes and decrease punitive methods of discipline, this study revealed the importance of assuring that our Black students received these multi-tiered systems of support as well. Shifts in practice can be as detailed as providing sentence stems to adults when responding to situations involving Black students in order to ensure a restorative approach as the interviews acknowledged how adults do not effectively address situations involving discrimination, which I have personally

observed as an administrator as well. Furthermore, as schools engage in trainings around Restorative Justice Practices to reduce suspensions and expulsions, they must consider the training of support staff and consider how these additional ways Black students experience discipline remain unaccounted for and exacerbate the racial discipline gap. Combining the extensive quantitative data on the racial discipline gap from previous studies with the qualitative data that focuses on the experiences of upper elementary Black students can provide a deeper look that can incite organizations to engage in deep reflection that leads to systemic change and acknowledge the shortcomings of current protocols and approaches towards our Black students, as Vincent et al. (2015) references in their study. In order to improve the racial discipline gap, schools must engage in deep, meaningful reflection on the lack of equitable treatment towards Black students and how current adults on campus should more thoughtfully and systematically implement Restorative Practices by considering how students with different cultural backgrounds can be negatively impacted.

Another aspect of the study that stood out to me as a practitioner was when the participants of my study spoke to differential treatment throughout all the interviews, and while most of them did not explicitly attribute race as a factor of this discrepancy in treatment, their discomfort with the notion of talking about race with myself and other school personnel alluded to it. Their responses showed me the significance of representation and ensuring students cultures are not erased at schools. As previously mentioned, student participants felt comfortable discussing their racialized experiences at home, but not with school personnel. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy remains a way to ensure schools thoughtfully and intentionally consider diverse populations and create a sense of belonging. Integrating this essential strategy throughout instruction while recognizing educators' own

biases throughout instruction can create opportunities for students to feel heard and valued, which can both improve the racial discipline gap and alleviate the negative social emotional impacts of discriminatory and biased experiences. As so much social unrest exists around banning talks of race in schools, I hope this study communicates the benefits and importance of amplifying our Voices of Color, even at the elementary level. Our Black youth have much to say and have endured so much at such a young age. As my young participants expressed the negative academic, emotional, and social impacts of dealing with discrimination and biases of adults and other peers on a regular basis and gave suggestions to improve systemic inequities in education, fighting for policymakers to include these voices and perspectives proves necessary and significant in reducing the racial discipline gap and the opportunity gap.

In this study, I gave upper elementary Black students the platform to share their experiences, suggestions, and strategies to cope with the racial discipline gap. I hope the findings from this study will help inform efforts to provide more equitable and fair practices that positively impact the educational journey of our Black youth.

Appendix A

Student and Teacher Interview: Semi-structured Interview Protocols

Relevant Research Questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do upper elementary Black students experience discipline practices in school?
 - a. How do students describe their disciplinary experience by educators?
 - b. What factors do upper elementary Black students attribute to their discipline experience?
 - c. In what ways, if any, are upper elementary Black students affected by their discipline experience?
 2. What resilience strategies, if any, do upper elementary Black students utilize to prepare for their discipline experiences?
 3. What do upper elementary Black students suggest as ways to lower the racial discipline gap?
-

Introduction: Hello _____. My name is Mrs. Kim. I am a researcher who is interested in learning more about your experiences at school. Thank you for meeting with me today. First, I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in my research and ask how you're doing today. Take a look at this picture and let me know which number you feel like? (Project the picture and pause for response) (Pause for response). Tell me why you chose _____. Thank you for sharing!

So today, I am hoping to learn more about you and what you do at school. Also, I want to ask how you think we can create the best school for you and your friends. The people here today will be the only people who will know about this conversation so I want you to feel comfortable and be honest. If you aren't sure what a question means, please just ask! Also, if you are not comfortable with answering a question, that is okay, just let me know.

I will use what you share to learn how we can make school better for students and educators. The interview won't be too long. What questions do you have before we begin? *[Pause for answer.]*

So one of the things researchers do is to record conversations. This will help me remember what you say. Would you be okay with me recording this conversation? *[Pause for verbal consent.]*

[Start recording devices.]

Interview Questions:

Opening Questions to build rapport and also reinforce there are no right or wrong answers in this interview:

First, I'd like to learn more about you!

-What is your favorite thing to do when you are not in school?

-Tell me a little more about _____.

Thanks for sharing that with me.

Let's turn to your school. Do you have a favorite class or subject?

Probe: Tell me a little about why it is your favorite.

What is your least favorite class or subject?

Probe: Tell me a little about why it is your least favorite.

Let's turn to people at school.

Who has been your favorite teacher or adult at school?

Probe: What are some reasons. How did they make you feel?

Who has been your least favorite teacher or adult at school?

Probe: What are some reasons. How did they make you feel?

Can you think of a time when you felt like you were treated unfairly at school by an adult in any grade? Like you got in trouble when you don't think you should have?

How about a time when you feel like another student should have gotten in trouble for the same thing you did, but they didn't?

Probe: List examples of adults Principal, VP, Campus supervisor, aide?

Probe (if yes): Tell me more. What happened? What was that like for you? Why do you think you were treated unfairly? How did it make you feel? How often would it happen? What were the consequences?

Probe (if no): Can you think about a time when other students in your school were being treated unfairly by an adult? Why do you think they were treated unfairly?

Have you ever gotten in trouble in your classroom?

Probe: At recess? At school? What happened? How did it make you feel? Tell me more. (If yes, same probes as above. How often/how many times? Did you think it was fair? What are some reasons?)

Probe: What were your consequences after you got in trouble? (letter, wait outside of the principal's office, say sorry?)

What do you wish (previously mentioned adult) knew about you when (in relation to something they said earlier)?

Probe: You mentioned (student's previous response). How would that change your experience?

Probe: If (previously mentioned adult) knew that, how would it make you feel?

Probe: What would you want (previously mentioned adult) to do differently in that situation?

Now let's talk about how you think adults view you at school. You mentioned how you were treated by (student response).

Fill in the blank. My (students' previous response regarding adult) thinks I am _____.

Probe: Why do you think that adult thinks that about you? (If students are struggling with response, follow up with examples: Do you think they think that way about you because of the way you look, way you talk, grades?)

Probe: Tell me more about (refer to student's previous response).

Probe: Continue the fill in blanks and follow-ups with other adults they mentioned.

Do you think other students' experiences (of being treated unfairly) are similar to yours?

Probe: In what ways?

Probe: How are their experiences the same?

Probe: What are some reasons they are treated the same?

Do you think other students' experiences are different from yours?

Probe: In what ways? How do they get treated differently?

Probe: What are some reasons they get treated differently?

Probe: How about students who look different than you?

Probe: What are their consequences?

You mentioned (students' previously mentioned response). What helps you to remain calm when things around you are not going well?

Probe: If students are struggling to come up with examples, mention activities like art, music, walking, sports, friends)

Probe: What is that like for you?

Probe: How does it make you feel?

Probe: How have parents or other adults helped you prepare for these experiences? What kind of activities help you calm down?

You mentioned earlier how (student's previous response about adults). What would you suggest are ways to make that person fairer to you/classmate?

Probe: What would that look like?

Probe: What are some reasons why you think they are not fair to you/classmate?

Probe: How would (students' previous response) make you feel?

Probe: What do you suggest are things that schools could do to be fairer? What do you suggest are things that schools could do so that students got in trouble less?

Thank you so much. We are almost done. Is there anything else that you would like to share that you didn't already talk about?

Thank you so much for sharing your stories and ideas with me.

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

[DATE]

Dear Families,

Anna Bae Kim, a doctoral student at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and a Principal in PESD, has been approved to conduct a research study that involves interviewing upper elementary Black and African American students about their experiences and perspectives regarding discipline in schools. The study hopes to address the systemic issue of overrepresentation of Black and African American students in discipline in elementary schools. Your child was selected based on his/her age and ethnicity.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, an interview would take place on Zoom, where conversations cannot be overheard by others to ensure your child's identity remains confidential. These interviews will take anywhere between 30-60 minutes. There are no known risks involved in this research, but if your child feels uncomfortable in answering any questions, he/she can choose to not answer. This study is entirely voluntary and your child would receive a \$15 e-gift card via email at the conclusion of the interview as compensation for his/her time. Participation in the research study will not affect your child's grades or relationship with the district and their school.

If you would like to participate, or have any questions, please contact annabaekim@gmail.com by (DATE).

Best regards,

[NAME]

Director of Department of Assessment, Translation, and Accessibility

Appendix C

Child Assent Form

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES

ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The Racial Discipline Gap from Upper Elementary Black Students' Perspectives

1. My name is Anna Bae Kim. I am a doctoral student at UCLA and a Principal at a school in Anaheim Elementary School District.
2. We are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about your experiences at school.
3. If you agree to be in this study, I would interview you on Zoom and make sure your identity remains confidential. I would ask you about ways to make the school a better place for you and your friends. After, you would receive a \$15 gift card for your time.
4. The school and district would not know your identity. Your participation in the study would not impact your standing or relationship with your school or the district.
5. I will be asking you some questions about your experiences in school. If at any time you do not understand a question, or you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you can ask me to explain it, or you can say you prefer not to answer the question.
6. By participating in this research study, you are giving the point of view from someone your age and adults can learn from your point of view!
7. Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. But even if your parents say "yes" you can still decide not to do this.
8. If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.
9. You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at 510-928-5952 or ask me next time.
10. Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

Name of Participant

Date

Appendix D

Parent Permission Form

University of California, Los Angeles

PARENT PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The Racial Discipline Gap from Upper Elementary Black Students' Perspectives

Anna Bae Kim, from the Education Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and a Principal at Anaheim Elementary School District, is conducting a research study.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study based on their age and ethnicity. Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The findings of this study hope to address the systemic issue of overrepresentation of Black and African American students in discipline in elementary schools.

What will happen if my child takes part in this research study?

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, we would ask him/her to:

Share their experiences with discipline at school
Get their ideas on how to create the most fair schools for students.

How long will my child be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about *30-60 minutes*.

What are some examples of questions that will be asked during the interview?

- Do you have a favorite class or subject?
- What is your least favorite class or subject?
- Have you ever gotten in trouble in any of those classes?
- What do you suggest are ways to make school more fair for you?

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that my child can expect from this study?

- There are no known risks involved in this research. However, if your child feels uncomfortable answering a question, they can decline.

- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and can be stopped at any time.
- Your child's identity would remain confidential and their participation in the study would not impact their relationship with the district and school.

Are there any potential benefits to my child if he or she participates?

Your child may benefit from the study by being able to share their thoughts and experiences on how to create a more fair and equitable environment at schools.

The results of the research may add to how to improve the racial discipline gap and decrease the overrepresentation of Black and African American students in discipline practices at schools. The results may also inform districts about how to best address this inequity.

Will my child be paid for participating?

Your child will receive a \$15 gift card for their time.

Will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify your child will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of safeguarding data by ensuring no one else will have access to listening in on the interview, changing your child's name in the data, and password-protecting all the data.

However, under California law, the interviewer will not maintain as confidential, information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any member of the program staff has or is given such information, he or she is required to report it to the authorities. Some examples may include getting hit repeatedly, excessive name-calling or speech that can be considered emotional abuse, neglecting to get medical care for the child.

What are my and my child's rights if he or she takes part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want your child to be in this study, and you may withdraw your permission and discontinue your child's participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you or your child, and no loss of benefits to which you or your child were otherwise entitled.
- Your child may refuse to answer any questions that he/she does not want to answer and still remain in the study.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Your child's data, including de-identified data, may be kept for use in future research.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can contact me at annabaekim@gmail.com at any time.

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN

Name of Child

Name of Parent or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian _____
Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

Name of Person Obtaining Consent _____
Contact Number

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____
Date

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