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DECREASING DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES: AN APPLIED RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF DEVELOPING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES AMONG TEACHERS AND EQUIPPING STUDENTS WITH ADDED SUPPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Schools and school leaders are charged to provide equitable educational opportunities and ensure the success for all students no matter their scholastic ability giving students access to an education that is culturally responsive. Despite this charge, African-American male students receive exclusionary punishment at disparaging rates which contributes to the widening achievement gap between white and black students. The purpose of this applied research study was to decrease the rate at which African-American males are referred to the office. This study analyzes the implementation of two elements: engaging teachers in a book study on culturally responsive teaching strategies and targeted counseling with students with chronic behavioral patterns. Focus groups, surveys, observations, and interviews were all employed as means of gathering data. The findings from this study indicate when teachers employ culturally responsive teaching strategies and students receive social-emotional support the existing discipline disparity decreases.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving family.

To my wife, Armintie, and my son, Prince Reginald Herrington II, my love is endless for you.

Your smiles and encouragement have sustained me throughout this journey. I dedicate this work

to you.

To my parents, Apostle and Mrs. James T. Herrington, you have always believed in me and

aspired me to reach the top in anything I attempted. This not a culmination; rather, it is a new

beginning to another chapter.

To my brother, Sheldon, and my sister, Natalie, the bond we share is unconditional, unmerited,

and will last forever. I love you both.

Finally, to Ms. Freddie Sparks who from a child always called me Doc. Though she rests in the

hollows of the Earth, she knew my destiny was far greater than I could ever imagine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How can I say thanks for the things you have done for me? Things so undeserved yet you gave to prove your love for me. The voices of a million angels could not express my gratitude. All that I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to Thee. To God be the glory for the things He has done.

Thank you for endowing me with such gifts and passion for those who have no voice. It is you

that have sustained me and provided me with the strength and courage to continue moving

forward becoming a better version of myself. Everything I am and will become is because of

You.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

As a school leader, one of our main focuses is to ensure the success and well-being of all

students through the equity of educational opportunities and culturally responsive practices

(National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Despite these efforts, students of

color face denial to education through exclusionary discipline practices at disparate rates which

further impedes the efforts of various educational programs and interventions to narrow the

achievement gap that exists between African-American and white students. The National

Clearinghouse of Supportive School Discipline (2013) defines exclusionary discipline as any

form of discipline that removes children from their original setting in which students receive

their educational services and benefits. This includes but is not limited to suspension and

expulsion.

According to the Mississippi Data Project (2017), 2.8 million children across the United

States receive exclusionary discipline and black students are four times more likely to receive

suspension than white children. In the state of Mississippi, eight percent of all students attending

Mississippi public schools were given one or more out-of-school suspensions during the 2013-

2014 school year, compared to the national average of six percent (Mississippi Data Project,

2017, p. 1). This is equivalent to 42,100 of Mississippi's kindergarten through twelfth grade

students being suspended annually, and black students are three times more likely to receive suspensions as the white students (Mississippi Data Project, 2017).

Research further suggests there is a strong correlation between exclusionary punishment and another chronic issue that plagues our nation, school dropout (Curley, 2016). The impact of this correlation includes the following implications: loss of income and government taxes, increased criminal activity, more participants depending on welfare services which result in higher financial burdens and costs for taxpaying citizens, and poorer health for those whose habitual choices lead to chronic suspension and even expulsion. It is estimated that students who are victims of suspension and dropout have economic impact of $11 billion in lost tax revenue, and as a result, it costs the United States approximately $35 billion to care for these individuals (Mississippi Data Project, 2017). Because of this loss in revenue, it becomes the responsibility of taxpayers to make up this difference, or educational programs become slighted as there are inadequate funds.

Description of the Problem

Lake City Elementary School is a pre-kindergarten through third-grade elementary school nestled in a wooded landscape situated in the eastern section of Lake County. The school is a part of an award-winning district that prides itself in having high academic programs. Additionally, the district supports a state of art Performing Arts program which includes a nationally recognized and award-winning marching band as well as a show choir program, both having performed on some major platforms. The school district is a district of innovation which provides students with applications to real-life experiences with classes in STEM, robotics, criminology, and biological sciences. This initiative coupled with a partnership with Project

Lead the Way, a grant funded program, provide STEM-based classes to every student in the district from Pre-K to twelfth grade.

While the school district has experienced much success in academia and has a B rating, barriers to the school's success exist. Barriers include a bustling group of 600 students who make up the special education population and students who receive free and reduced lunch waivers.

The district is a part of the Lake City community which, according to the 2017 US Census data, is home to 12,719 residents. The city's population is comprised of 55% African American, 44% white, 1% biracial, and 1% Hispanic. The average household income is $32,181 leaving 40% of the children in the population below the line of poverty. Additionally, 40% of children in Lake City come from single-parent homes where mothers are the heads of households.

Lake City Elementary School boasts a population of approximately 1,370 students and employs 150 certified and paraprofessional staff members serving children from the county as well as the city. It is the only elementary school in the county serving students in grades pre-kindergarten through three. The student demographic make-up of the school is relatively 47% black, 51% white, 1.2% Hispanic, <1% Native American and Asian; however, racial disparity existed in the ethnic ratio of teachers and students. The certified teachers' racial make-up consists of 71 (89%) white teachers, 8 (10%) black teachers, and 1 (1%) Asian teacher. While this is an issue of concern, it is not the most pressing issue as it relates to the content of this study.

The disproportionate rate at which African-American children were referred to the office for inappropriate behaviors was alarming. African-American children account for approximately

61.11% of the discipline referrals processed at LCES. On the contrary, white students account

for 37.19% of the discipline referrals written and processed at LCES. The remaining 1.7% of

referrals processed are from students who are Native Americans and Asians. These numbers did

not change much, if any, when you extrapolate bus referrals which account for almost half of the

discipline at LCES. Yet in the absence of bus referrals, African Americans receive 60% of the

office referrals, white students receive 30%, and Native Americans and Asians account for one

percent of the office referrals. Of the total referrals issued, African-American males are being

referred to the office at an astounding rate as 128 of them have generated over 330 referrals

alone.

  As assistant principal, I administer discipline for the entire school's population. Though

highly challenging, this happens to be rewarding as I am afforded the opportunity to work with

teachers to help cultivate their classroom management skills. In addition, the school has adopted

positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) to model acceptable, appropriate school

behavior. PBIS is a behavioral-intervention program that provides teachers with positive

strategies to redirect students' misbehavior and encourage and reward students for positive

behavior. The school also has a teacher support team (TST) committee, counselors, and an in-

school suspension/detention (ISS/ISD) instructor to help administer discipline.

  Even with these measures in place, students still receive office referrals for a range of

misbehaviors such as defiance, disrespect, physical aggression, inappropriate language, and

classroom disruption. Further, a small population of students suffers from chronic misbehavior as

they had been referred to the office on multiple occasions. To counter this problem, it was

necessary to find ways to attract prospective applicants to diversify the teaching staff. Likewise,

it was also necessary to find ways to decrease the number of office referrals from this student

population by equipping teachers with the necessary strategies to become successful and inclusive in reaching and teaching all students and by also providing these students with alternative behavioral choices which would allow them to remain in class.

Through my own practice, using an applied research design with a program evaluation, I examined the problem of improving teachers' ability and capacity to instruct and manage children of color to decrease the disparity in school discipline seen among this population, especially black males. Sections to follow will include demographic, contextual information about the school and district where induction strategies and professional development were conducted, followed by a rationale for the problem. Global and local reasons which contributed to the necessity of this study will be included in the justification.

Significance of the Problem

As educators, we should "commit ourselves to building a human rights movement…for education, not incarceration, for jobs, not jails, a movement that will end legal discrimination…that denies them basic human rights to work, to shelter, to education, to food" (Michelle Alexander, 2013). The school-to-prison pipeline which festers among our education system continues to grow as more African-American students are experiencing suspensions and expulsions for discipline infractions at higher rates than their non-African-American peers. Typically in any school, students of African-American decent not only receive far more office discipline referrals (ODRs), but also the punishment is indeed harsher than for their counterparts. In fact, Randolph (2015) suggests nondisabled, African-American students are three times as likely to be expelled or suspended as other ethnicities. Likewise, disabled African-American students are more than twice as likely to be expelled or suspended as other disabled students of different ethnicities (Randolph, 2015). Additionally, by the number of students who display

chronic misbehavior, the punishments issued are deemed non-effective and do not bring about lasting change in the child's behavior. These punishments usually are isolation in nature such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and also corporal punishment.

This discipline gap further creates a significant impact on the already existing achievement gap which exists among minority students. According to the Mississippi Department of Education 2017-2018 Accountability Grade Report Card (2019), 49% of African-American students at Lake City Elementary were proficient in mathematics while white students had already met the state's 2025 proficiency goal of 70%. Additionally, African-American students made up 56.6% of the bottom quartile in mathematics, and 57% of these students were male. In English, 48% of all students at LCES scored proficient on the state's assessment. Of these students, 62.7% were white students, and 35% were students of color. Only 47.5% of males were reportedly on grade level. It is a widely known fact that students who spend more time suspended receive less time getting quality instruction which could otherwise make gains to closing this existing gap.

Many questions go unanswered regarding this issue. Are black students notorious for misbehavior? Are the behaviors for which they are written up socially unacceptable for the school setting? Has it become a social norm that black students do not perform well academically, thus, making the decision to isolate them from classroom instruction a priority among educators and school administrators? Are our schools racially biased by employing large subgroups which do not mirror the demographic makeup of our students? Are the teachers, no matter their ethnicity and socioeconomic upbringing, prepared to deal with behaviors which are different from what was socially acceptable to the culture in which they were raised? Whatever the answers to these questions are, one thing is for sure. There is a strong correlation between

the achievement gap and the discipline gap among minority students, and we as educators must work diligently to rectify this problem (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The success of schools depends on our willingness to tackle this issue which antagonizes our great education system. More importantly, our willingness to be open-minded in dealing with this problem could lead to a better life in the future for students and their families who suffer from this method of disenfranchisement.

This study focused on creating a plan to decrease the number of ODRs issued to black students while also providing teachers with intervention strategies to help our students display appropriate behaviors at school. With the only discipline options being in-school suspension, corporal punishment, and out-of-school suspension, developing strategies would help teachers keep these students in the classroom to receive quality instruction. Their continued exposure to quality instruction would keep students from falling behind and close the achievement gap, thus helping our school and district's accountability. Failure to do so would continue to contribute to the school district's drop-out rate, thus, increasing crime in our communities as these children have no other means of taking care of themselves nor providing for their families because of the lack of education and skills (Curley, 2016).

Significance for the Audience

The focus of this study aimed to have a positive impact on all participants and stakeholders involved. The primary beneficiaries of this study were both teachers and students. The teachers benefitted from the process of the study as they develop strategies to successfully reach and teach all students, especially black males. While traditional-program teachers as well as alternate-route teachers complete a course in classroom management, the course does not adequately prepare one for the real-life experiences that teachers encounter daily. While no one

approach is successful for all students, equipping teachers with strategies to build their repertoire of managing students, developing teachers' interpersonal relationships with their students, and educating teachers on cultural awareness as they become culturally sensitive to the needs of their students should increase the competency of teachers to lead better classroom environments.

Also, there should be a positive impact on the target group of students involved. As a result of teachers undergoing the process, the predicted product was increased student engagement in class, improved student-teacher relationships, more time exposed to curricular standards thus leading to positive student outcomes in overall academic achievement. Students who experience academic success often lead better lives, including higher-earning incomes, better health, longer life span, and ultimately the American Dream.

Contingent on the success of this applied research study at Lake City Elementary, the program may provide additional professional development for other teachers within the school as well as the district. Similarly, schools across the state and country with similar context may benefit from the findings of this program allowing the success of the model to travel beyond the walls of LCES.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this applied research study was to decrease the rate at which African-American males are referred to the office. The research process began with a description of the problem at Lake City Elementary School followed by a justification of the need to conduct the research. A review of literature guided the study as it looked at the effects of disproportionate disciplinary practices and successful attempts to remedy these unfair practices.

The action plan for this applied research study was developed through collaborative efforts of the administrative team. The problem was identified after reviewing data indicating a

disparity with the district's intervention specialist. After the problem was identified, collaboration among the administrative team, counselor, and teachers led to the development of an action plan including elements of professional development through a book study for teachers and counseling for students, both with hopes of decreasing the apparent disparity. The study occurred over 18 months. Data collection through observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were used in this internal program evaluation to assess the action plan for the purpose of determining if goals were met and what improvements could be made.

The central phenomenon for this applied research study was the rate at which male children of color were referred to the office. By equipping teachers with the necessary strategies to successfully reach and teach this subgroup of at-risk students, the goal was to decrease the rate of discipline referrals for students of color. This mixed methods study involved analysis of data from interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and observations for the purpose of improving practice. Engaging teachers in cultural awareness and encouraging teachers to foster positive student-teacher relationships was very important in the program to help students adopt appropriate school behaviors to decrease referrals and impact student achievement.

Research Questions

1. Did the program help to improve students' display of acceptable school behavior by a reduction in referrals of 5%?

2. In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers discipline their students, in particular black boys?

3. What did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process?

4. How do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*?

5. Did the counselor have the training, time, and resources to effectively administer the Strong Kids curriculum?

6. Have the strategies of the Strong Kids curriculum helped to change black male students' perceptions of how they deal with challenging situations?

Overview of the Study

While it was important for students to exhibit positive, appropriate school behaviors, it was equally important for teachers at Lake City Elementary School to develop cultural competence in the diverse cultures which made up the genotypes of the school and establish meaningful relationships with students. In Chapter One, the need for this study was established as an effort to address the disparate discipline rates among male students of African-American decent. Chapter Two provides relevant literature on factors contributing to disproportionate discipline practices and successful attempts that have contributed to a reduction in the disparity in various contexts. Chapter Three focuses on the collaborative efforts from stakeholders in the development of the action plan, the implementation of the action plan, and the evaluation of the action plan. Chapter Four presents the findings used to answer the research questions. Chapter Five provides an analysis of the study along with implications and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Racial disparities in school discipline have existed amongst schools in our nation for

years and continue to be an ongoing problem today (Rumberger & Losen, 2016). Trends show

students of color receive more office discipline referrals (ODRs) than any other ethnic group of

students (Ford, 2016). Likewise, the result of disciplinary actions administered by school

administrators indicates not only do students of African-American decent receive more ODRs

but black males are also the leading recipients of exclusionary punishments, such as in-school

suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion (Ford, 2016). "These racial and gender

disparities are evident as early as preschool, where black students are 3.6 times as likely to

receive an out-of-school suspension as their white classmates" (Raffa, 2018, p. 1). This blatant

denial to quality education further impacts the academic achievement gap as students of color

tend to do poorly on standardized testing and are underrepresented in advanced placement

classes.

In an effort to reduce the racial disparities in discipline and give all children an equitable

chance to receive a quality education, I am focusing my research study on successful, research-

based ways to remedy disproportionate disciplinary practices. For organization purposes, the

focus of this literature review will address the effects of disproportionate disciplinary practices,

factors which contribute to the evident disparities which exist in school discipline, and successful

attempts to remedy disproportionate disciplinary practices observed in schools. Further, the

research in this review will be utilized to help identify the causes of the disparities that exist

within my own school, LCES, and also to successfully implement a plan to eliminate such

disparities creating opportunities for all students to experience success within the walls of our

schools and thereafter.

Effects of Disproportionate Disciplinary Practices

According to Raffa (2018) "research indicates that a child's early educational experiences

greatly influence their development and outcomes later in life, making these data particularly

consequential" (p. 1). In that regard, the impact of students' negative experiences at school as it

relates to exclusionary discipline is immediate and has implications to affect their academic

achievement as well as other areas of their life beyond their school-age years. Gregory, Skiba,

and Noguera (2010) found a strong correlation between the achievement gap and the discipline

gap of minority students. Their research shows black males who are disproportionately

suspended miss instructional time which lends itself to a cycle of "academic failure,

disengagement and escalating rule breaking" (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010, p. 60).

Depending on the nature of the infraction, these students' suspensions range from one class

period to as much as 10 days of lost instruction. Because of the strong correlation between time

students are engaged in learning and student achievement, this loss of instructional time

contributes to the growing achievement gap that exists among minority students. The research

findings suggested the following strategies may be employed to help ease the gap: making

administrators aware of bias when writing and administering referrals, increasing alternative

options of punishments, making exclusionary punishment a last resort, identifying the root cause

of behavior problems, and reconnecting students to the mission of the school when disciplining students.

Additional research that documents the effects of disproportionate discipline practices is found in the research findings of Skiba, Rausch, and Ritter (2004), which is a composition of three briefings on the effectiveness of suspension, expulsions, and its alternatives in Indiana schools. Their research, which states that students of color are four times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension and two and one-half times as likely to be expelled as their white peers, supports the disparities observed in school discipline. The research documents one of the negative effects to exclusionary discipline is the direct correlation with black students' lack of success on the state's high stakes assessment. This is evident as only 48.03 % of students who received a suspension passed the state's assessments for math and English, while only 47.91% of students who were expelled passed the state's assessment in both subjects. Other negative effects are observed within communities as schools criminalize students' misbehavior through suspensions and expulsions. As their research calls it, this school-to-prison pipeline results in higher levels of incarcerations, overrepresentation of students of color in the juvenile detention centers, and ultimately an increase in dropout as students have more time and opportunities to connect with gangs and other negative role models for youth.

Factors Contributing to Racial Disparities in School Discipline

The disparities can be attributed to many factors; however, the most common in research findings are the following: racial bias among teachers and administrators, disproportionate teacher ratios, and teacher rated disruption as subjective versus objective.

Racial bias. Racial bias among educators and administrators account for some of the racial disparities seen among school discipline. Ford (2016) examined the root causes of

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exclusionary discipline for students of color. While some believe students of color are overrepresented in the discipline data because they commit more infractions, Ford counters this and suggests the overrepresentation of students of color involved in discipline infraction is due to implicit racial bias that many educators are unaware they possess. The implicit bias of teachers is based on the finding that black students are nearly four times as likely to receive exclusionary discipline such as suspensions as their white counterparts for the same behavior. In order to mitigate this phenomenon, Ford (2016) suggests making educators aware of their racial bias and challenging these biases will reduce the disparity which exists among students of color and discipline.

In another study, Ispa-Landa (2018) conducted a review of literature which documents the continued exposure of African-American students to harsh punishments despite reformative efforts. The article suggests teacher bias largely contributes to the racial disparities observed in school discipline. The article further suggests that the use of social psychological skills, such as individuating and perspective-taking, which have been used in non-school settings, could also be utilized among educators as a means to reduce the racial disparities seen among race and school discipline.

Disproportionate teacher ratio. Disproportionate ethnic teacher-student ratios are another factor in why disparities in disciplinary practices exist, according to research. Lindsay and Hart (2017) conducted a study to determine if race matching students to teachers had any effect on the discipline disparity that exists between minority and majority students. The data for this study was retrieved from the state of North Carolina which shares an identical trajectory of United States data. The data shows the current teacher workforce ratio does not match the ethnicity ration of students in America's schools. This study concluded that exposing black

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students to black teachers reduces the likelihood in which black students receive exclusionary punishment. This further indicates that schools make hiring black teachers a priority to reduce the disparity.

  Teacher-rated disruption. Teacher-rated disruptions are another factor which contributes to the disparities in school discipline. These disruptions are divided into subjective and objective infractions. Subjective infractions are those which are opinion based, such as disruptive behavior, disrespect, excessive noise, and threats. On the other hand, objective infractions deal directly with rules which are directly broken, such as skipping, truancy, weapons, drugs, vandalism, and profane language. Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, and Smolkowski (2017) conducted a study to examine the racial disparities in discipline decision making when teachers are to write referrals for subjective behaviors rather than objectively defined behaviors. Data was taken from office discipline referrals (ODRs) from approximately 1,824 schools around the United States which has a total enrollment of 1,154,686 students. The results of this study indicated that racial disparities were more common in subjectively defined ODRs rather than disparities in objectively defined ODRs. Variance in subjective ODRs accounted for 1.5 to 3 times as much variance in disproportionality than objectively defined ODRs.

  Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) conducted a study to determine the relationship between the disparities in discipline and the following factors: gender, race, and socioeconomic status. The study included over 11,000 subjects that were middle school students from 19 different schools in a large, urban community. The findings from the chi square test included females and whites were underrepresented in all measures of disproportionality, while black males were overrepresented in exclusionary discipline. The study also showed while boys received more referrals for infraction that were less serious to sexual acts, girls received the most

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referrals for truancy. Further black boys received more office referrals for disrespect, excessive

noise, threat, and loitering, which are all subjective to the teacher's interpretation of disruption.

Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, and Horner (2016) conducted a study to determine

if the patterns identified in school discipline data would support or contradict the Vulnerable

Decisions Point (VDP) model. The study involved 1,666 elementary schools from all over the

United States with 483,686 office referrals issued by 53,030 teachers to 235,542 students. The

results indicated that African-American students were more likely to receive exclusionary

discipline than white students for subjective office discipline referrals. In addition, the fact that

the disproportionality in subjective office discipline referrals supported the VDP model is

evidence that implicit racial bias is considered in making disciplinary decisions.

Successful Attempts to Remedy Disproportionate Disciplinary Practices

Gregory et al. (2016) conducted a study to determine if My Teaching Partner Secondary

(MTP-S), a coaching-teaching professional development program, could reduce the racial

disparities among student discipline. The study, which incorporated mixed methods and

experimentally analyzed data, included teachers and students from five middle and high schools

from the state of Virginia. The professional development program allowed teachers to video

themselves while a coach analyzed their interactions with students. The coach gave feedback

based on what was recorded, and the teacher underwent reflective practices to improve their

craft. The study found that teachers who participated in the second year of the MTP-S

professional development program wrote less ODRs across the board reducing the racial

disparity gap in school discipline. Gregory et al. (2016) further concluded that MTPS exposed

students to a more rigorous curriculum and higher academic and behavioral standards.

In a previously addressed study, Ispa-Landa (2018) composed an article which documents the continued exposure of African-American students to harsh punishments despite reformative efforts. The researcher suggests educators should engage in social psychological professional development, such as individuating and perspective-taking, to mitigate implicit bias, thus reducing disproportionate disciplinary practices. According to Ispa-Landa (2018), individuating entails focusing on details about a person rather than focusing on information about a person's social category. The research suggests that when teachers become interested in the intrinsic qualities of their students rather than focusing on students' external factors used to categorize them into social groups, real relationships can form, and the external factors that compose the student's makeup dissipates. Ispa-Landa (2018) asserts perspective-taking involves educators making a conscious effort to see things through the lens of another individual. Getting another perspective often creates empathy which helps to mitigate implicit bias.

Lindsay and Hart (2017) conducted a study to determine if race matching students to teachers had any effect on the discipline disparity that exists between minority and majority students. The data for this study was retrieved from the state of North Carolina which shares an identical trajectory of United States data. The data shows the current teacher workforce ratio does not match the ethnicity ratio of students in America's schools. This study concluded that exposing black students to black teachers reduces the likelihood in which black students receive exclusionary punishment. This further indicates that schools make hiring black teachers a priority to reduce the disparity.

Cook et al. (2018) conducted a study of the efficacy of Greet-Stop-Prompt (GSP) as a low-cost, potentially high-yield strategy designed to serve as an intervention to reduce office discipline referrals, reduce disparities among African Americans in discipline, improve black

male students' school connection, and to promote teacher-student interactions. Researchers also wanted to assess the feasibility of the implementation of GSP, which is a multifaceted approach for preventing and addressing student infractions. Greet provides educators with proactive classroom management strategies to prevent problem behavior; Stop brings awareness and regulation of situations to avoid teachers from acting within their own implicit bias; and Prompt provides teachers with effective reactive strategies to respond to infractions in a manner that is consistent, fair, appropriate, and with empathy. The study included a quantitative approach with a participatory action research design which included subjects from three elementary schools which had been taken over by the state due to racial disparities in discipline and special education referrals. Upon implementation of the GSP intervention, findings included the following. Risk ratios decreased indicating a reduction in exclusionary discipline almost immediately after implementation. Though disparity among black students still existed, a reduction in the average risk ratio among black students was observed. Researchers also found that black males reported a 15% increase in their school connection or sense of belonging. Last, data indicated educators found implementing GSP to be feasible and acceptable.

Last, Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz (2015) conducted a study to examine students' experience in classroom with varying levels of implementation of restorative intervention practices. Teachers were given professional development on restorative practices and implemented these strategies within their practice. The study was quantitative as students answered questions on a Likert scale about their experiences with the implementation of these strategies. The researchers found teachers who were perceived with higher levels of implementation of restorative practices reported better teacher-student relationships as students composed their response regarding their experience. Students also reported higher respect levels

for teachers as well. This study also reported high implementation of restorative practices has implications for reducing the disparity of exclusionary discipline among African-American students.

Conclusion

Disparities in student discipline are very prevalent in our schools and cause many negative effects. Black students, who are typically targets of disparate discipline practices, often suffer from poor academic achievement as a result of lost instructional time (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Additionally, these students also fall prey to the justice system as a result of the disparity (Skiba, Rausen, & Ritter, 2004). There are several factors which contribute to the disparity of discipline practices. Racial implicit bias is one factor, and helping educators recognize and challenge their implicit bias through individuating and perspective-taking can reduce these biases as teacher form more intimate relationships with their students (Ford, 2016; Ispa-Landa, 2018). Another factor which contributes to the disparity is disproportionate teacher ratios. Students whose race matches their teacher are less likely to suffer from exclusionary discipline; therefore, hiring teachers which resemble the demographics of the student population is necessary to reduce the disparity (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). A final factor, teacher-rated disruption, also contributes to the disparity by overly punishing black students for behaviors which are deemed disruptive per the opinion of their teacher (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2012; Smolkowski et al., 2016). There are researched-based programs that will reduce the disparity faced by students of color. MTP-S is a researched means to reduce racial disparities in discipline through coaching and teaching teachers to reflect upon their interactions with their students (Gregory et al., 2016). Likewise, implementing the Greet-Stop-Prompt intervention amongst teacher has the ability to have an immediate effect in reducing the disproportionate

discipline practices (Cook et al., 2018). Last, high implementation of restorative practices yields

positive results in reducing the discipline disparity by helping teachers and students form strong,

positive relationships (Gregory et al., 2015). This literature review supports the need to develop

an action plan to reduce the disproportionate school discipline practices in Grenada Elementary

School. Chapter 3 will include methods of an action plan on reformative efforts to reduce these

disparities and give all students an opportunity to experience success at school.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter presents the design of the applied research and the methods employed in this research. The purpose of this mixed methods research was to decrease the rate at which children of color are referred to the office. The action plan aimed to accomplish this reduction by the implementation of a program which addressed two key elements. The first element entailed taking teachers through a book study of *The Dreamkeepers* which aimed to improve teachers' capacity to instruct and discipline students of color. The second element involved in the action plan addressed the behavioral needs of this population of students at Lake City Elementary School through targeted counseling using the Strong Kids curriculum. The following research questions guided the basis of the study and data collection:

1. Did the program help to improve students' display of acceptable school behavior by a reduction in referrals of 5%?

2. In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers discipline their students, in particular African-American boys?

3. What did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process?

4. How do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*?

5. Did the counselor have the training, time, and resources to effectively administer the Strong Kids curriculum?

6. Have the strategies of the Strong Kids curriculum help to change black male students' perceptions of how they deal with challenging situations?

Identifying a problem of practice, developing and implementing an action plan, and learning throughout the process was the focus of applied research. The goal of applied research is to increase the capacity of those within an organization's context to promote ongoing organizational learning and improvement. This action research study aimed to improve the capacity of the organization to address a problem of practice within LCES, set goals, develop a plan of improvement, and evaluate the progress.

The participants of this study included a group of ten second and third-grade boys at Lake City Elementary along with a group of five second and third-grade teachers. Because these teachers had a burning desire to build relationships with their students, yet the behaviors exhibited by their students left them highly frustrated, it was necessary that this group of teachers become successful at teaching African-American boys. This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the collaboration employed among stakeholders to develop an action plan that addressed the needs of reducing referral writing and the improvement of black male students' behavior. Further, this section includes, in an addition to an overview of collaborating stakeholders, a review and timeline of the process, its effects from Covid-19, existing research which guided the work, and internal data examined to create the action plan.

The second section includes a description of the full action plan and modifications made due to school closures with Covid-19. The goal of the action plan was to decrease the rate at which African-American males are referred to the office by two means. One of the means included increasing teachers' cultural competence and capacity for teaching African-American male students through the implementation of the strategies presented in Gloria Ladson-Billings'

book, *The Dreamkeepers,* which was presented and discussed in our professional learning communities (PLCs). Finally, the last means to achieve the set goal was to improve students' display of appropriate school behaviors gleaned from the counseling sessions utilizing the Strong Kids curriculum. Accomplishing the ultimate goal will ultimately lead to students' increased time in the classroom and hopefully increased student achievement for this subgroup of students.

The elements which composed the action plan were designed with the goal of reducing the rate at which African-American males are referred to the office through improving student behavior with targeted counseling and building teachers' cultural competence through the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*. For each element, a detailed description of the systems, participants, timelines, responsible parties, and resources is presented in detail along with the measurable goals associated with each element.

The third and final section of Chapter Three presents the program evaluation of the action plan. After three semesters post-implementation of the action plan, the program underwent an evaluation to assess the level of goal attainment and the organization's ability to utilize an applied research design to address the current issue of African-American male students and teachers' cultural competence of students. Both formative and summative assessments were used to assess program evaluation, and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to answer the research questions.

Development of the Action Plan

Almost four years ago, I was recruited to come to LCES to serve as an administrator over discipline. Although I had spent 12 years in the district as a teacher and an administrator, my professional experiences have always been in secondary education. The elementary setting was completely new to me in the professional sense. Day after day, I was bombarded with teachers

sending children with referrals to the office in need of discipline. Classroom disruption, disrespect, defiance, inappropriate physical contact (fighting), verbal altercations, and inappropriate behaviors on the bus were just a few of the reoccurring behaviors the children of LCES were exhibiting. Because the district had adopted a code of conduct, administering the punishments were standardized and usually involved exclusionary punishments such as in-school detention (ISD), in-school suspension (ISS), and out-of-school suspension (OSS) as well as corporal punishment. Corporal punishment, however, was administered sparingly as the state legislature voted to eliminate corporal punishment as a discipline option for children with a disability having an individualized educational plan (IEP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

While administering discipline, I began to take notice of what seemed to be a revolving, perpetuating cycle involving black boys entering my office. It seemed as if it was impossible for them to remain in the general education setting. The discipline options handed to me by the code of conduct were not yielding long-lasting behavioral changes. Many of the students I saw were not novices to misbehavior. In fact, they displayed chronic behavior problems and visited me on several occasions. The punishments issued only provided ongoing frustration for the student and, in several cases, temporary patches rather than long-lasting behavioral change. In Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz's (2015) study on restorative intervention practices, which promotes inclusiveness, relationship building, and problem-solving, students reported positive experiences and higher respect levels for educators who were perceived with higher levels of implementation of restorative practices in their classrooms. This study also reported a strong implication in reducing the disparity of exclusionary discipline seen among black students with high implementation of restorative practices.

At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, the administrative team, which consisted of the newly hired principal, the assistant principals including myself, the counselor, and the interventionist met to discuss the upcoming school year. One of the principal's goals was to minimize teacher requests to ensure our classrooms were demographically balanced. Another goal was to bring diversity to the staff as we hired new teachers since research shows exposing minority children to minority teachers decreases the disparity in which minority students are referred to the office (Lindsey and Hart, 2017). These goals were issues that were addressed as challenges in Chapter One. Additionally, the interventionist mentioned she had been in a meeting with the superintendent, and due to the number of African-American boys subjected to corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline, our discipline files would be up for review. It was evident that we, as a school, had to do something, not just for compliance but because our children needed a chance at education and our teachers needed strategies to build self-efficacy to reach our students. By the conclusion of our meeting, we all agreed our students could use some targeted counseling, and we would consult with our district's psychologist for recommendations on researched-based programs. I had also discussed with my professor at the University of Mississippi the need to develop the cultural competence of our current staff. He suggested doing a book study on *The Dreamkeepers* to help educate our current staff on cultural competence, the needs of our students, and improve staff's interactions with children. According to Gregory et al. (2016), teachers who participated in a program that analyzed teacher-student interactions and reflective practice had better interactions with their students and wrote less office discipline referrals decreasing the racial disparities in discipline. Ispa-Landa (2018) further suggested educators should engage in social psychological professional development, such as individuating

and perspective-taking, to mitigate implicit bias, thus reducing disproportionate disciplinary practices.

As a result of our collaborative efforts, the elements of this study were developed. The elements consisted of a book study on the book *The Dreamkeepers* to promote professional development, targeted counseling with the counselor utilizing the Strong Kids curriculum which was suggested by our school district's psychologist, and an after-school tutoring and activities program. Unfortunately, funding for the after-school program was denied, and this element was eliminated from this study.

Description of the Action Plan

Professional learning communities on *The Dreamkeepers*. The first part of the action plan involved engaging second and third-grade teachers in professional learning communities in a book study on Gloria Ladsing-Billings' book, *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladsing Billings, 2009). This book profiles seven teachers in urban city schools who have been successful in forming meaningful relationships with minority students. The purpose of this element was to build teachers' cultural competence and equip them with strategies to better manage their classes by building meaningful relationships with minority male students. Prior to the initial meeting, teachers were interviewed to gauge their relationships with their students and their discipline practices in their classrooms. This data collected from this interview was used to form a baseline and to see if there was any change in their practices and perceptions as a result of the program. Afterward, teachers began engaging in deep reads on the book, *The Dreamkeepers*, to adopt strategies and practices from teachers profiled in the book. Facilitated by myself, the discussions among teachers included how they could incorporate these techniques into their classroom practices.

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At the conclusion of each PLC, teachers completed a survey on how effective the session was. Teachers included their likes and dislikes about the session and how they planned to implement the strategies presented. Following the PLC sessions, teachers were observed by the administration, including the principal and the two assistant principals, to determine the level of implementation of the strategies presented from the book. At the end of the program, the teachers engaged in a post-interview to determine if their student-teacher relationships have been cultivated and if their discipline practices have changed since the inception of the program. Teachers further expressed their perceptions of the program at large, in particular about the training and their thoughts on the strategies presented in the book study within our context.

Covid-19. School closure as a result of Covid-19 halted face-to-face meetings for the book study. Additionally, teachers were busy more than ever building lessons, creating packets, and shifting to online/virtual learning. This reassignment of teachers' attention caused modification with this element in the study which included pausing this element. During the closure, teachers participated in Zoom sessions to discuss additional supports to provide students when the school year resumed. Teachers organized academic packets and made calls to parents to support students and their families during the school closure. Resumption of this element as designed continued at the onset of the opening of school for the 2020-2021 school year.

Goals. The goal of the book study on *The Dreamkeepers* was to increase teachers' capacity to effectively teach African-American males by exposing staff to successful teachers who had experienced success at teaching this subgroup of students. I was hopeful that teachers would be able to employ strategies they read about in the book and incorporate them into their own practice. The long-term goal was to change the way teachers manage classroom discipline

while evolving into more efficient teachers possessing the skill set to maintain a learning environment conducive for all students.

Timeline. Data collection and ordering of materials began in the Fall of 2019. Thereafter, the professional learning communities began in the Fall of 2019 and were ongoing throughout the year. Observations also began in the Fall of 2019 and were ongoing throughout the duration of the study. Because Covid-19 forced an early termination of the school year, professional learning communities and observations were carried on through the 2020-2021 school year.

Responsible party. I was responsible for facilitating the PLC sessions. I used the word facilitating rather than leading because I wanted the teachers to have a vested interest in the strategies they, as a whole, decided to incorporate into their practice as we matriculated through the book. With respect to teacher observations of such practices, the administration was responsible for observing teachers and providing them with feedback.

Resources needed. The Dreamkeepers books were purchased. Books were approximately $13, and five were needed for a total $65. Teachers' and administrators' time was required for the study for reading, PLCs, and observations for an approximate budget of $8,000 over the duration of the study. Teachers spent on average about two hours a week reading, prepping for PLCs, and planning lessons. Additionally, print material for surveys were needed for an additional approximate cost of $100.

Targeted counseling. Targeted counseling was another element of the action plan. The counselor and I sat down to discuss the criteria to involve subjects. As a result of this collaborative effort, second- and third-grade male students were identified with chronic behavior referrals having five or more office discipline referrals at the close of the 2018-2019 school year.

Initially, 10 students fit the criteria of being African-American descent and male as well as having five or more discipline referrals. Other students were included as their behavior warranted counseling through the duration of the study. The counselor organized students into groups of 5 and coordinated group counseling sessions with them during their special time— such as physical education, library, music, art, or computer lab—to ensure students were not missing instructional time.

Prior to the first session, the counselor administered a short survey to the students to gauge their perceptions of school, their teachers, and themselves. This was done to get a baseline of what students thought about themselves and their school environment. Afterward, the counselor presented lessons from the Strong Kids Curriculum, which is a research-based program recommended by our contracted district psychologist. The lessons progressed from inward feelings and emotions to external factors that may affect human emotions. Additionally, lessons were provided to help students navigate what to do when they are feeling angry, happy, or worried as well as how to be a good friend. This was very important as many of these children lacked appropriate social skills and interpersonal relationships. Each week for 10 weeks, students engaged in a new lesson while going over previous lessons learned. At the conclusion of each weeks' lesson, students completed an exit survey which allowed them to express their likes and dislikes about the session and how they planned to use the information presented. In addition, the counselor also engaged in one-on-one sessions as students' needs become prevalent as in her normal job description.

Covid-19. As a result of the global pandemic and school closure, this element of the study underwent modifications as the nature of the pandemic inhibited face-to-face counseling sessions. Rather, the counselor maintained communication with the participants through phone

calls to provide needed supports for students and their families. This was important because this population of the student body relies on the support of the counselors to maintain and reinforce positive relationships amidst the crisis. Upon reopening of schools, parents and students were offered three choices of ascertaining their educational plan of choice. The choices included traditional face-to-face learning, hybrid learning which students come to school for fact-to-face learning two days per week and the remainder of the week attend school online, or completely online virtual learning. Resuming the targeted counseling sessions with the Strong Kids curriculum continued upon the re-opening of schools as children became acclimated to their new normal and supports were needed accordingly.

   Goal. The goal of the counseling element was to help students demonstrate increased appropriate school behaviors gleaned from the counseling sessions to increase time in the classroom and promote student achievement.

   Timeline. Disaggregating the previous year's data occurred during the early Fall semester of 2019. However, due to other special projects administered by the counselor, this implementation of this element was on hold until Spring 2020. During this time, students engaged in one of 10 lessons per week. As discussed earlier, Covid-19 forced global school closure for the 2019-2020 school year. Thus, the participants were not able to initially finish the series of lessons during the 2019-2020 school year. Rather this element was continued at the onset of the 2020-2021 school year. As participants completed the 10-lesson series, other students would be added as needed.

   Responsible party. The counselor was responsible for facilitating counseling sessions, both group and individual sessions. Additionally, the counselor also engaged participating students in exit surveys recounting students' experience of the counseling sessions.

Resources needed. The counselor adopted Merrell's Strong Kids curriculum which is approximately $50. The counselor devoted a tremendous amount of time to the study preparing lessons, counseling students, and generating print materials.

Program Evaluation

The purpose of the program evaluation was to determine the success of the action plan in reducing referrals for second and third-grade African-American males at Lake City Elementary School and to continue the cycle of ongoing organizational learning within the organization. The program evaluation set out to answer the following research questions:

1. Did the program help to improve students' display of acceptable school behavior by a reduction in referrals of 5%?

2. In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers discipline their students, in particular African-American boys?

3. What did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process?

4. How do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*?

5. Did the counselor have the training, time, and resources to effectively administer the Strong Kids curriculum?

6. Have the strategies of the Strong Kids curriculum help to change black male students' perceptions of how they deal with challenging situations?

Question 1 was an output question and was answered using the discipline referral data from the entire study. Referral numbers were reviewed for both the teachers and students included in the study and were compared with their total number of referrals from the previous year. Discipline referral data was analyzed to determine if there had been a reduction in their office referrals from the beginning until completion of the program. Questions 2, 3, and 4 focused on the book study

referencing *The Dreamkeepers*. Question 2 was an output question and was answered by data collection from teacher interviews at the conclusion of the program. Question 3 was a process question. Teachers completed surveys at the end of each PLC discussions of the book. This data collection was used to make modifications to the PLC formatting to improve their time together. Question 4 was also a process question relating to the book study. Data collected from the periodic observation checklists was compiled to show what strategies were being implemented and how they were being implemented. In addition, data from the PLCs also showed how teachers were implementing the strategies and their level of success as they had these discussions. Teachers who were struggling gained insight from other teachers on how to better implement the strategies from the book. Questions 5 and 6 evaluated the counseling element using the Strong Kids curriculum. Question 5 was a process question and was answered by analyzing the data from students' exit interviews with the counselor. Additionally, informal conversations with the counselor provided the answer to this question. Finally, Questions 6 was an output question that utilized the student's counseling exit surveys, scores from their daily behavior checklists, conversations from teachers during TST meetings, the focus group post-program interview, and the SWIS discipline report to determine if the Strong Kids counseling element had an effect on students' behavior and how they responded to challenging situations.

A logic model, which lists the elements involved in the action plan, is included below. Goals are provided for each element of the action plan along with the evaluation instrument used to measure goal attainment. Notably, this information aided in answering the research questions listed above. Table 1 lists the elements and details of the evaluation plan.

Table 1

Logic Model/Evaluation Plan

Elements	Goals	Timeline	Who	Evaluation Data
Book study on *The Dream-keepers*	Short term – To increase teachers' capacity to effectively teach African-American males Long term – To change the way teachers manage classroom discipline while evolving into more efficient teachers	August 2019-Spring 2021	Teachers, principals, and assistant principals,	Teacher Pre-Program Interview (Appendix A) Teacher Survey (Appendix B) Classroom observation checklist (Appendix C) SWIS Discipline Report Teacher Post-Program Interview (Appendix D)
Targeted Counseling	Short term – To develop and present a positive perception to students about the school and their teachers Long term –To get students to demonstrate increased appropriate school behaviors	Fall 2019-Spring 2021	Counselor, Teachers,	Student Counseling Exit Survey (Appendix E) Daily Behavioral Checklist (Appendix F) SWIS Discipline Report TST Intervention Meetings Post-Counseling Interview Focus group of students (Appendix G)

Book study on *The Dreamkeepers*. The first element of the action plan was the book study on *The Dreamkeepers*. The goal of the book study was to increase teachers' capacity to effectively teach African-American males by exposing staff to successful teachers who had experienced success at teaching this subgroup of students. I was hopeful that teachers would be able to employ strategies they read about in the book and would incorporate them into their own practice. The long term goal was to change the way teachers managed classroom discipline while evolving into more efficient teachers possessing the skill set to maintain a learning environment conducive for all students. Following each PLC sessions, teachers engaged in a survey. The survey was to assess the quality of the PLC, teachers' perceptions of their likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses about the presented strategy, and how they planned to implement the strategy presented during that session. The data collected from this survey was used as a formative assessment for the purpose of improving the program.

Also, the principal and the administrative team conducted observations to assess the level of implementation of the presented strategies. In that regard, an observation protocol was developed to track what strategies were observed and their level of success. This protocol also allowed for dialogue between the observer and the teachers for the purpose of adjusting the program. Likewise, this tracking also provided evidence of continued evolution on the account of the teacher. The data collected from the observation protocol was used as a formative assessment for the purpose of improving the program.

Document analysis of discipline reports compiled by the school's interventionist was also being reviewed weekly as a means of formative assessment to make changes to the program. This data was also used in the summative report to determine if the referral writing on African-American males has been reduced by 5 percent.

Finally, teachers engaged in a post-program interview regarding the book study. The interview was to determine if the book study led to any changes in the way teachers managed their classrooms and disciplined students, especially African-American males. The data collected from the post-interview was used as a summative assessment.

Targeted counseling. The final element of the action plan was the targeted counseling component. The goal of the counseling element was to get students to demonstrate increased appropriate school behaviors gleaned from the counseling sessions to increase time in the classroom and promote student achievement. An additional goal of the counseling element was to develop and present a positive perception to students about the school and their teachers. Each week students completed an exit survey in regards to the counseling session. The survey allowed students to express their knowledge of the content presented, their likes and dislikes about the sessions, and how they could implement the presented strategy from the Strong Kids' curriculum. The data collected from this survey was used as a formative assessment.

Students were also given daily behavioral checklists which were completed by the teachers and the counselor. The behavioral checklist logged students' behavioral choices and provided a numerical rating for the child's behavior. Students were assigned a goal and were given prizes for reaching the goal. The quantitative data collected from the checklist was also used as formative assessment and summative.

Document analysis of discipline reports compiled by the school's interventionist was also reviewed weekly as a means of formative assessment to make changes to the program. This data was additionally used in the summative report to determine if the referral writing on African-American males had been reduced by five percent.

At the conclusion of the 10 counseling sessions, a focus group of second and third-grade African-American male students participated in a post-program interview. The purpose of the interview was to determine if students' perception of how they should handle challenging situations changed and if they had gained a positive perception of their teachers and school. Students also got to elaborate on the topics that were most beneficial to them, what they liked most about the counseling, and their dislikes. The qualitative data generated from these interviews were used for both formative and summative assessment.

Formative and summative elements. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected throughout the study for both formative and summative assessment. For the basis of improving the program, formative assessment data was reviewed on a continuous basis. At the conclusion of the first year of implementation, further development and evolution of the action plan was based on a continuous review of themes, feedback, and process data. Continual improvement was sought for the program.

A summative evaluation of the program was completed at the end of the study to determine the success of the program. The feedback from the summative evaluation determined the program's continuance. Accomplishing the goals of the program was a means of defining the success of the action plan.

Conclusion

The development of this action plan hinged on the collaboration from stakeholders. While the overarching goal of the action plan was to decrease the rate at which African-American male students are referred to the office, the supporting goals of the study, which were providing teachers with professional development on cultural competence, classroom management, and restorative justice, and providing students with counseling to teach appropriate

school behaviors as an intervention, aimed to reduce referral writing significantly across the board. While Covid-19 brought about mass shut-downs of schools, businesses, and life as we once knew it, the study was interrupted. The soft reopening of school and parents' ability to decide the educational choice plan, traditional, hybrid, or virtual options, also affected the study and the participants involved. However, the study was resumed at the onset of the 2020-2021 school year. Chapter Four will address the findings from this research study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

As described in Chapter Three, this applied research study sought to reduce the rate that

African-American males are referred to the office at Lake City Elementary School. An action

plan was designed and implemented to accomplish this aim. Elements of the action plan entailed

engaging teachers in professional learning communities surrounding the book study, *The*

Dreamkeepers, and utilizing targeted counseling using the Strong Kids curriculum for a cohort of

second and third grade African-American male students. An additional goal of the project was to

promote organizational learning through collectively collaborating to identify the problem,

develop an action plan, implementation of the plan, and evaluation of the plan to make changes

accordingly.

Lake City Elementary School was a pre-kindergarten through third-grade elementary

school nestled in a wooded landscape situated in the eastern section of Lake County. With a

school population of approximately 1,370 students and employing 150 certified and

paraprofessional staff members, Lake City Elementary School is the only elementary school in

the county serving students in grades pre-kindergarten through three. While the student

demographic make-up of the school was relatively 47% black, 51% white, 1.2% Hispanic, <1%

Native American and Asian, what was alarming was the disproportionate rate at which African-

American children were referred to the office for inappropriate behaviors. African-American

children accounted for approximately 61.11% of the discipline referrals processed while white students accounted for 37.19% of the discipline referrals written and processed at LCES.

Utilizing the research from Chapter Two and the collaborative efforts of stakeholders, an action plan was developed for the purpose of reducing the disparity, providing this subgroup of students with supports to be successful in the school environment, and engaging teachers in a book study which focused on culturally responsive practices to glean strategies from teachers who have been successful in teaching minority students. A cohort of ten African-American male students were identified who had five or more referrals, which happened to be in five teachers' classrooms. They along with their five teachers were selected for participation in the study. The teachers participated in a book study on *The Dreamkeepers* and discussed strategies from the text during professional learning communities. The teachers also planned culturally responsive activities to increase classroom engagement among these students as well. Student participants were invited to targeted group counseling. For the purpose of creating a more intimate session, to ensure and protect the morale of the sessions, and to comply with Centers for Disease Control guidelines to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, the students were divided into smaller groups so that the counselor could maximize the time spent with the students.

The researcher collected and disaggregated both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the following research questions.

1. Did the program help to improve students' display of acceptable school behavior by a reduction in referrals of 5%?

2. In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers discipline their students, in particular African-American boys?

3. What did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process?

4. How do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*?

5. Did the counselor have the training, time, and resources to effectively administer the Strong Kids curriculum?

6. Have the strategies of the Strong Kids curriculum help to change black male students' perceptions of how they deal with challenging situations?

This chapter will present each of the research questions listed above and discuss the findings which led to the answers generated for each question. Multiple data points will be discussed to support these findings.

Research Question One

Research question one asked, "Did the program help to improve students' display of acceptable school behavior by a reduction in referrals of 5%?" Yes, there was evidence of a 5% reduction in the referrals generated from the five teacher participants in the study.

Descriptive analysis of the teachers' discipline data was used to answer the question. Prior to the onset of the program, this cohort of five teachers wrote on average 18.8 referrals during the 2018-2019 academic school year. During the 2019-2020 school year, there was a decrease in the average number of referrals written by this cohort of teachers. Collectively, the average number of office discipline referrals written by this cohort of teachers during the 2019-2020 school year was 8.6. This was equivalent to a 54% decrease in the number of referrals written by this cohort of teachers. During the 2020-2021 school year, this group of teachers wrote on average one referral. In relation to the previous school year, this was an 88% decrease in referrals written among this cohort of teachers.

Descriptive analysis of the students' discipline data was also used to answer this research question. During the 2018-2019 school year, the ten student participants of the study averaged

five referrals. During the 2019-2020 school year, that number decreased to a mean of two

referrals. This was equivalent to a decrease of 60% in referrals received by these students. In

2020-2021, these students received an average of 0.55 office discipline referrals. From the

previous school year, this was a 73% decrease in the average number of referrals.

Covid-19. The pandemic of the coronavirus disrupted the study as this forced a school

closure. Students went home mid-March 2020 on normal conditions for Spring Break and did

not return until the start of school in August of 2020. Therefore, the average number of referrals

received for the 2019-2020 school year was solely based on the number of days the students

were actually in school rather than the normal 180-day school year. These numbers were also

impacted for the 2020-2021 school as some of the student participants who were involved in the

study experienced a delayed start to school due to parental concerns about their children's safety

from the spread of coronavirus.

Research Question Two

In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers

discipline their students, in particular African-American boys? In speaking with teachers during

the post-program interview, teachers were asked how the book study influenced their

disciplinary practices. One teacher responded:

> I feel that I am more aware that something more may be going on if a student is having
>
> an off day. I now try to remember that I am not always feeling my best when I walk in
>
> the school doors, so how can I expect my babies to. I try to extend more grace now.

The teachers, who were all white with the exception of one teacher, maintained the book helped

them recognize the difference in societal and cultural norms which exist between many black and

white families. While in some cultures, certain actions exhibited by students could be viewed as

disrespectful, and in other cultures not so much. An example of this which we addressed was students' silence when being questioned during a reprimand. Many of the teachers deemed the students' lack of response to be disrespectful. On the contrary, the students felt their silence was an intervention of safety taught to them by their families and the experiences of their culture to inhibit them from responding in a manner that would be viewed as disrespectful and to prevent them from saying things they would later regret. As the study progressed, teachers recognized the students' silence was not a means to be disrespectful, rather students needed time to be able to talk about the issue after the height of their feelings and emotions had subsided and both parties were calm.

Teachers also focused on the cultural responsiveness of being aware of the students' social and emotional needs and also being aware of agencies that could provide services to the families of these students. In particular, one teacher reflected on a child she encountered who suffered from intense emotional needs. Rather than writing the student up for his outbursts, the teacher became more aware that his behavioral outbursts were not a matter of disrespect or disobedience. Rather she recognized his behavior needed the attention of the mental health therapists which could provide more intense intervention to help guide the student into a better state of mental health.

All of the teachers spoke on equity and equality in reference to their discipline practices. Teachers spoke on the varying spectrum of needs and capabilities of their African-American male students as well as their other children. As a result, they understood blanket punishment did not always fit every student nor every situation. Rather, as one teacher stated, "the discipline handed out should benefit that individual student." To clarify, this teacher became more methodical in her thoughts of what discipline would best suit the child to get the intended results.

As a result, teachers administered discipline that was tailored specifically to the needs of the individual child.

Research Question Three

Research question three posed what did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process? The teachers found the information presented in the book study to be informative, insightful, enlightening, and helpful as they awakened their awareness to the need, elements, and benefits of culturally responsive teaching. At our first initial meeting to discuss the book, I found myself doing a lot of the talking. While the teachers were very aware of the existing disparity in discipline, because of their racial differences, they felt uneasy talking about the issues. At that point, I broke the ice and empowered them to do so as they had the freedom to talk freely and no one would look at them differently even if they had opposing views. Teachers were informed that the environment was protected and safe and nothing said would be taken judgmental or jeopardize their employment, rather it would be period of learning and growing. They were encouraged to speak freely and openly as this was very important to being able to resolve the present issue. Afterwards, teachers began to open up and engage in conversation yet with some reservation. At the end of the first session, I told them we would take turns presenting findings from each chapter, so each teacher was assigned a chapter to lead the discussions. This was a great idea which led to more unrestrained conversations. As teachers led the discussions, they were able to freely, openly talk about sensitive cultural issues facing our students which create such disparities in discipline. Throughout the book study, teachers identified additional strengths and weaknesses or challenges with the book study process. They are identified in the subsections below.

> **Strengths.** The consensus of the teachers enjoyed the book study process. Though the

book presented some issues that were very culturally sensitive, teachers enjoyed having an environment to discuss issues dealing with racial inequalities and differences along with the disproportional social and cultural capital seen among the diverse student population without judgment. They were able to openly discuss these issues, utilize the strategies from the book on building relationships, and utilize their own experiences to generate ideas to better understand their students as individuals, study their students' behavioral patterns, and strategize ways to help them be successful without losing their identity. One teacher commented the open sessions allowed her the opportunity to better interact with her students and relate to them. Teachers expressed how they enjoyed collectively being able to collaborate to brainstorm ideas with other teachers.

Weaknesses or challenges. In reviewing the teacher PLC surveys completed by teachers at the end of each book study session, several themes evolved as challenges or weaknesses to the book study process. One challenge which seemed to be consistent among the teachers was the element of time. Teachers struggled to stay abreast with the pacing guides of mathematics, reading, and language arts to meet the demands of high-stakes assessments and mastery checks. Therefore, finding the time to plan lessons, research materials, or allow for open-ended, student-led discussions was very challenging as they attempted to incorporate the strategies from the book study. One teacher said:

> Planning, time-management, and implementation are some of the biggest obstacles I believe most all teachers face. Having an idea to incorporate something is normally not a problem, preparing materials, taking the time to mentally work it out in your mind, and then having the time to give to carry it out, without suffering the consequences of falling further behind on tested skills is huge!

Another challenge that teachers faced was finding good quality resources or implementing grade-level appropriate strategies. Teachers initially thought they had to look up specific activities rather than adapting what they were already doing. Collectively we discussed ways in math to use word problems based on students' interests, incorporating their names, and framing the problems around elements from their culture with which they were familiar. For literature/reading, because teachers used preconstructed thematic units, teachers focused on including culturally responsive activities through writing, critical thinking, and comparing elements of the stories to students' personal experiences. Also, as teachers discussed strategies such as building relationships with students through attending ball games and social events outside of school, the global pandemic made this nearly impossible.

Finally, teachers thought many of the strategies presented in the book were more developmentally appropriate for middle school and high school students. Teachers tried allowing more student-to-student discussions; however, teachers found it very difficult to give up that level of control as students had some difficulty remaining on topic when talking with each other. We discussed the importance of practicing this skill as it would not look ideal initially; however, with practice and modeling students would adapt to teachers' expectations. Additionally, teachers tried incorporating current events from the media; however, during this time of a highly sensitive election year and transition of power, teachers had to use much caution to ensure a neutral environment.

Research Question Four

Research question four addressed how do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*? Teachers employed various strategies from the book study throughout their lessons. Teachers chose strategies that seemed to fit their personality and

classroom style. We often discussed in our meetings that the makeup of each classroom was different. The children were different; their personalities were different; and the teachers, themselves, were different. Consequently, they may have had to take a different approach in utilizing the various strategies presented. The following is a collection of data from teacher observations.

       Cultivating relationships. Teachers were intentional about getting to know their students on a personal level in order to establish and cultivate meaningful relationships with them. Teachers spent time allowing students to develop "All About Me" posters which featured themselves. Students displayed pictures and crafts of things that personally describe them such as their families, hobbies, likes, dislikes, favorite foods, favorite places to visit, and their future aspirations beyond school. Students were able to present their individual posters to the class.

       Teachers also used the time when students entered the classroom to greet students. During this time, teachers and students discussed students' interests, church activities, hobbies, family matters, and problems. One teacher commented in her interview that the students come into her room wanting to talk to her and how much they love for someone to listen to them.

       Teachers also cultivated relationships with students by doing lunch dates. The lunch dates allowed for teachers to select a student to eat lunch within the absence of the other students. This time was focused on spending time with that individual student and bonding. Teachers also found time to talk with students during recess time. Another teacher commented:

       I try to show an interest in the things that interest them. I show my excitement as they

       learn and tell me ways that they use to help them solve problems. I talk to them about

       myself and my family so that they can see a little more of me.

       Teachers also used these one-on-one times to discuss with the students their academic

concerns. During these sessions, teachers would talk about their learning goals, discuss grades from the previous assessment, students' current proficiency level, set goals for the following assessment, and develop plans to achieve these goals.

Not only did teachers cultivate relationships within the schools, but teachers also found ways to display their concern for their students outside the school. One teacher provided rides for her students whose parents had an unforgiving work schedule with very little family support. In addition, she mentioned dropping off Christmas gifts and virtual schoolwork packets to students who were at home ill. These actions allowed students and their families to see the teachers' genuine concern for them as people as well as their students. Two other teachers mentioned living in the same rural community as some of her other students. They both welcomed the students to their homes to engage in fun activities with their families.

While teachers worked to develop relationships with students, teachers also help students form relationships within their classrooms. Teachers took the strategy of building a family-style atmosphere and implemented them into their classrooms. To initiate this initiative, classes collaborated to develop family crests and glyphs with symbolisms that were a representation of the students' characteristics. Teachers often used "family talks" to present and discuss social behavior and conflict resolution skills when problems arose in the classroom. In addition, teachers assigned students study buddies to encourage peer interaction and peer tutoring.

Rewarding students. During instruction, teachers gave verbal commendations, passed out candy, tickets, and other rewards to students for exemplary acts. Teachers would distribute these rewards for students who answered questions correctly, exemplified model behavior, or even provided an alternate way for solving problems.

One teacher recognized the socio-economic disadvantages of her students made it

difficult for her students to bring snacks to eat during snack time. As a result of recognizing the needs of her students, the teacher applied and was awarded a grant to provide healthy snacks for her students to indulge in throughout the school year.

Integration of cultural music and chants. Teachers used chants to get students' attention. During these chants, the teacher would provide the initial saying, then the students would collectively respond. The teachers mostly used this strategy in times of transitions, when students' noise level seemed to migrate to a louder tone perhaps when they were working in groups, or when she just needed to convey something really important to the students that she wanted them to be mindful of. Additionally, teachers also used the chant response when students responded to her questions with correct answers. With respect to cultural music, teachers played hip-hop music videos to help engage students in memorizing math fluency facts and ease transitions.

Accessing and expounding on prior knowledge. The book study focused on accessing students' prior knowledge as students bring a wealth of knowledge to the learning environment. Teachers used this strategy to build a strong correlation between what students already knew to the new objective the teachers wanted students to master. Teachers accessed prior knowledge through questioning, open-ended discussions, giving personal experiences, and using pictures to make an association.

Research Question Five

Did the counselor have the training, time, and resources to effectively administer the Strong Kids curriculum? Though the counselor did not receive any formal professional development through the Strong Kids curriculum, the curriculum did not pose any content that was beyond the scope of the counselor's job description and her master's degree level of

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training. Additionally, the counselor was able to converse and collaborate with the school's contracted psychologist who recommended the curriculum for the study. The counselor was also given resources such as access to the copier, finances to purchase materials for lessons, as well as snacks for boys to eat while in the sessions. After the initial meeting with the boys, the counselor did make adjustments to the time we allotted for the sessions which were initially 30 minutes. As a result, the sessions extended into an entire period of 50 minutes to ensure the counselor and the students had enough time to review the previous lesson as well as go through the new lesson being presented. Additionally, time was also needed for students to write their responses on the exit tickets to end the sessions.

Additionally, students reported in their post-program focus group interview how much they enjoyed the sessions with the counselor and inquired about when they could go back. When asked what they liked most about the sessions with the counselor, one student replied he felt important because he finally knew what it felt like to be heard. Others enjoyed the fact they were able to reflect on their feelings and have conversations about their thoughts.

Likewise, the Daily Behavioral Checklist (Appendix F) that was used to rate students' daily behavior was constructed to assess the students' exhibition of the content taught by the counselor. The checklist rated students' in-class behavior on the following three domains of being respectful to the teacher and their peers, being responsible by completing assignments and participating in class, and being safe by not engaging in inappropriate physical contact with peers and occupying their appropriate space. The fact that students were able to demonstrate school-appropriate behaviors exceeding their 80% goal and collectively maintain an average of 85.98% answers the question that the counselor was effective in utilizing the Strong Kids curriculum to help students improve their behavior.

Last, in speaking with the counselor during informal conversations, the counselor spoke of how the students were improving overall in regards to their behavior and how the students were excited about acquiring their goals. She also mentioned the boys enjoyed earning prizes for meeting their goals. When asked if she felt the program was responding to the needs of the students in a positive way, she agreed the curriculum was accomplishing the goal of improving students' behavior by providing them with practical strategies the students could use.

Research Question Six

Have the strategies of the Strong Kids curriculum help to change black male students' perceptions of how they deal with challenging situations? Yes. There were several means of data that were analyzed to make this determination. Initially, a focus group of students engaged in an interview (Appendix H) to gather information regarding students' behavior choices and perceptions of their teachers and school. During this session, 70% of the students who participated recognized and reported their behavior as bad or inappropriate. Students further provided evidence to support their answers saying their teachers take away Dojo points. Class Dojo is a classroom management tool which allows teachers to award points to students for good behavior. Teachers can also withdraw points from students for inappropriate school behaviors as well. The students also offered their perception of the school, in fact, one student mentioned his dislike of the school saying it was boring. Others responded that their teachers were mean which contributed to their dislike of the school environment.

Following the initial interview, these students engaged in 10 counseling sessions with the school's counselor using the Strong Kids curriculums. The lessons addressed SEL competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. With each lesson, students were given an exit survey/questionnaire (Appendix

E). When asked what they will do when presented with a challenging situation, the students

gave the following responses: take a deep breath, walk away, let it go, tell the teacher, and move

away from things and people that create bad feelings. These answers indicate they had the

capacity, tools, and resources to make better behavioral choices as they had been accustomed to

aggressive behavioral responses deemed inappropriate for the school setting.

In addition, students' behavior was tracked on the Daily Behavior Checklist (Appendix

F), which rated their daily behavior on a scale of 0-2 for every class period, and it was entered

into the SWIS discipline and intervention database. Students could earn a maximum of 36 points

throughout the day; however, the goal was for students to demonstrate positive appropriate

school behavior 80% of the time. During the first six weeks of the study, collectively the

students displayed appropriate school behavior 75.62%. During the second six weeks of the

study, collectively the students earned 87.02% exceeding the goal by 7.02%. By the time

students exited the counseling sessions, students maintained appropriate school behavior with

85.98% of the times they were observed, which was 5.98% above the targeted goal. Table 2 lists

the average percentages students earned every six weeks.

Table 2

Average Daily Behavioral Checklist Data

	6 Weeks	12 Weeks	18 Weeks
Total Average	75.622	87.024	85.984

Finally, at the end of the study, a focus group of students engaged in an interview. The

purpose of this interview was to gain qualitative data on their perception of their own behavior

since having completed the counseling sessions using the Strong Kids curriculum and to see if

their perception towards their teacher and the school had changed. During the course of the interview, the students described their pre-program behavioral patterns as inappropriate. Students listed the following behaviors which resulted in discipline referrals: pushing; horseplaying; throwing objects; fighting on the bus and playground, defiance, and failure to following directions. Students also alluded to earning zeros on their daily behavior chart as a direct reflection of their misbehavior. Additionally, students stated that their teachers perceived them to be bad students because of their behavioral patterns. Having gone through the program, students described a change in their behavior. According to the students, their behavior was "better than it used to be." Students maintained they now think about possible consequences before they commit an act and that they like being by themselves to avoid getting into trouble. In fact, these students reported on incidents where they had helped their peers solve problems using the techniques and strategies taught by the counselor. Additionally, they had reduced their occurrences of inappropriate classroom behaviors and disruption since the onset of the counseling sessions. Further, students admitted to earning more two's on their daily behavior chart. As previously discussed, the Daily Behavior Checklist's rating scale ranged from zero to two with two being the highest rating for positive behavior. When asked about their perception of their teachers, students responded to the current relationships they now have with their teachers. One student said, "My teacher and I are friends. She helps me with my homework, calms me down when I'm feeling upset, and buys me things when I need it." Another student replied, "We get to learn about things in a way we can understand." Another student who lives near his teacher replied, "I go to her house and she lets me play with her dog." All of the students shared stories that shared a common theme of love and adoration for their teachers as the teachers made learning engaging through games and problem-solving, rewarded students in

various ways for good behavior and achieving goals, and purchasing needed supplies to address students' needs.

Last, teachers involved in the study spoke to students' improved behavior. Through informal conversations, teachers testified of students engaging in positive behavior modifications. While there were many stories, one teacher spoke of one of the participating students who had previously pre-implementation been put off the bus on several occasions for defiance, inappropriate language, and fighting wanted to see me because a friend of his had been hit on the bus. Rather than reverting to his previous behavior, he chose to seek administrative help to help his friend solve his problem.

Collectively, the data indicated strategies from the Strong Kids curriculum were successful in changing students' perception and how they dealt with challenging situations. The decrease in student referrals, surpassing the goal of 80% displaying appropriate school behavior, and the stories of teachers and students all indicate students' present response to crises is an improvement from their former behaviors.

Conclusion

The findings of the study presented in this chapter were evidence of the success of this program. While there were challenges and weaknesses associated with the study, the decrease in referrals written by teachers, the decrease in referrals earned by this group of African-American male students, and the increased display of appropriate school behaviors as evidence by this group exceeding their behavioral goals show the impact of the success of the program. From the book study which was aimed to build teachers' competence in culturally responsive teaching strategies to the targeted counseling sessions using the Strong Kids curriculum to address students' social and emotion needs, both elements together contributed to the success of the

program as they served to complement one another. While research in Chapter Two alluded to the success of these elements individually, paring these elements together seemed to enhance those findings as I saw teachers grow in their relationships with their students and students gain and display behavioral interventions to be successful in the academic environment. Chapter Five will discuss drawn conclusions from the study, further implications for future study, limitations, as well as recommendations.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this applied research study was to decrease the rate that African-American males are referred to the office at Lake City Elementary School. The project gained prominence among stakeholders within the school as records supported the disproportionate rate at which African-American males are referred to the office. Chapter One not only identified this discipline gap but also provided implications for how this disparity impacts the achievement gap as well as the socio-economic outcomes as a result. Therefore, it was imperative to create a program to address the behavioral choices of students as well as the cultural competence of teachers to successfully reach, manage, and engage students of varying backgrounds. The project aimed to analyze how culturally responsive teaching training and practices observed among teachers and intervention strategies given to African-American male students affect teachers' referral writing and students' exhibiting appropriate school behaviors. The study employed two elements to address the identified problem: a book study on *The Dreamkeepers* and targeted counseling using *Merrel's Strong Start*, a Strong Kids curriculum (Ladsing-Billings, 2009; Whitcomb & Damico, 2016).

Chapter One introduced the problem and provided the purpose of the study, which was to decrease the discipline disparity while changing the school to prison trajectory of African American males and propelling them in a positive direction of optimal opportunities in society

through improving the cultural competence of teachers and providing targeted social-emotional counseling to students. Chapter Two provided research on successful remedies that have been employed to help decrease the existing disparity. Chapter Three detailed the development, implementation, and evaluation of the action plan and the collaborative efforts of stakeholders which were employed throughout the action plan. Chapter Four reviewed the results of the study as it addressed the findings for each of the research questions which guided the research project. Chapter Five poses conclusions drawn from the study, further implications for future study, limitations, as well as recommendations.

Analysis

Chapter Two provided an overview of a myriad of studies which have had success in reducing the disparity among discipline. The following elements were incorporated for this study for the sake of achieving the purpose. They are not an exhaustive list nor are they the only means which could be used to achieve the purpose.

Professional learning communities on *The Dreamkeepers*. The immediate goal of the book study on *The Dreamkeepers* was to increase teachers' capacity to effectively teach African-American males by exposing staff to successful teachers who have experienced success at teaching this subgroup of students. The long-term goal was to change the way teachers manage classroom discipline while evolving into more efficient teachers possessing the skill set to maintain a learning environment conducive for all students. We managed to accomplish both goals. Prior to the program, teachers completed the Pre-Implementation Interview (Appendix A) to gather insight into their classroom management philosophy, awareness of culturally responsive teaching, and their relationships with their students. From that interview, most of the teachers involved had limited knowledge of culturally responsive teaching, and if they

incorporated cultural awareness, it was limited to the major holidays, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Valentine's Day. It was simply not a focus, and none of the teachers had any previous formal training on culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, teachers reported positive relationships with their students; however, while teachers hoped their students viewed them as fair, students reported the contrary in their Pre-Program Focus Group Interview (Appendix H) expressing their dislikes toward their teachers and calling them mean. However, by the program's end, the students' reference to the teacher as a friend solidifies the fact that teachers developed strong relationships with students thereby increasing teachers' capacity to manage their classroom and evolve into efficient teachers.

In preparation for the PLC meetings, the teachers engaged in a deep read of the book *The Dreamkeepers* to have informal, candid conversations about each chapter. Teachers discussed strategies from the book and teachers worked collaboratively in their PLC meetings to plan and develop culturally responsive resources they could utilize in the classroom for instruction to engage students and to build relationships with students. Teachers also shared ideas on what they could do to establish meaningful relationships with students. As the meetings progressed, teachers also used this time to reflect on the strategies they implemented, share how implementation was going, and collaborate on how they could improve their individual efforts. Likewise, they began to share what they had learned with other teachers which sparked interest and excitement throughout the school. This development and ongoing collaboration contributed immensely to building teachers' capacity and shifted how they manage their classrooms. In fact, all the teachers reported they would recommend all teachers go through the book study as they felt the information on culturally responsive teaching was very valuable to their professional growth and development.

In the study, teachers were also observed to assess how they were implementing the strategies from the book study. While the implementation was initially slow, teachers had to establish how they could fit in the strategies without completely losing the identity of their classrooms. Teachers began focusing more on establishing relationships with their students as a starting point. Though this seemed to be an easy starting point for most teachers as it did not require any costly resources other than time, its effect was resounding in changing the students' perspective of their teachers and ultimately the school. As the study progressed, observation data showed more academic strategies being implemented in the classroom. As a result, in both observations (Appendix C) by the researcher and teachers' reflections in their Post-Implementation Interview (Appendix D), it was reported that teachers noticed an increase in student engagement and students' display of on-task behaviors as well.

Targeted counseling. The goal of the counseling element was to help students demonstrate increased appropriate school behaviors gleaned from the counseling sessions to increase time in the classroom and promote student achievement. This goal was accomplished. The counselor worked with students in small groups utilizing the Strong Kids curriculum. The lessons addressed combinations of the following social-emotional learning competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The counselor guided students through lessons, engaged students in discussions, allowed students to speak on issues that were important to them, allowed them to reflect through journaling, played games, incorporated skit reenactments, and read books to help students understand how to process and understand various emotions and feelings and how to make better decisions. The counselor also hosted individual sessions with students as warranted when students, teachers, or the principal requested. The counselor worked diligently to develop a

relationship with each student. Students were given an 80% behavioral goal, and their behavior was tracked every period throughout each day using the Daily Behavioral Checklist (Appendix F). At the conclusion of the initial six weeks of the study, students had only completed two sessions and on average was approximately five percentage points shy of the goal. By the end of week 12 and thereafter, students exceeded their behavioral goals. The check and balance between the counseling sessions and the behavior tracking seemed beneficial. Students were excited about gaining the points as well and meeting their goals.

Program Evaluation Standards

Yarborough et.al (2011) defines program evaluation as the systematic investigation of the quality of programs and projects for the purpose of decision making, judgments, conclusion, capacity building in response to the needs of stakeholders leading to organizational improvement. The applied research study presented here was evaluated based on the following evaluation standards: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability.

Utility seeks to examine to the extent to which program stakeholders find evaluation processes and products valuable in meeting their needs (Yarborough et.al, 2011). All stakeholders involved in the study found great use in the study. Teachers gained insight into culturally responsive strategies which increased their capacity to engage with their students. Teachers were able to openly discuss their newly employed strategies with each other during PLCs to gain feedback and collaborate for the purpose of improving the study. Teachers also used the feedback from their observations to make adjustments to their delivery. Students were able to utilize the strategies from the program to display appropriate school behaviors. For the purpose of the evaluation, students were able to voice their concerns with the counselor. The counselor was then able to tailor lessons to benefit the students and their interests. Additionally,

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the behavior checklist afforded students to make ongoing modifications to their behavior as they were rated on a continuous basis throughout the day. Further, the organization gained insight on how to take a problem of practice and through collaboration develop a plan of action alongside an evaluation program for the purpose of organizational improvement.

Feasibility determines "the extent to which resources and other factors allow an evaluation to be conducted in a satisfactory manner" to increase efficiency and effectiveness (Yarborough et.al, 2011, p.288). The program evaluation plan was practical and responsive in the sense that as teachers gained feedback on their implementation, they were able to adjust their implementation to improve the overall study. This was also the case with the counseling element. Because of the simplicity of the study and evaluation, an abundance of resources and materials were not required. Rather, time was a crucial factor regarding the study and the evaluation process. Thus, it was very important as to not waste this resource.

Propriety refers to 'what is proper, fair, legal, right, acceptable, and just in evaluations" (Yarborough et al., 2011, p.106). Before the development of the study, the researcher underwent training from the Collaborative Instructional Training Initiative (CITI) which included several modules providing information on general research and the ethics centered around using human subjects. In addition, the project and its' appendices were submitted for approval by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the safety of the human subjects that would be involved in the study. The IRB concluded the project did not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects' research at 45 CFR 46.102; thus, the IRB maintained the study did not necessitate IRB approval. Measures were taken to protect the data collected, and the identities of the subjects were kept confidential and secure.

Accuracy is based on the construct of truthfulness and integrity of the findings "achieved

through sound theories, methods, designs, and reasonings" (Yarborough et al., 2011, p.158).

Data was collected through various mediums: interviews, observations, exit surveys, and focus groups. Subjects were allowed to review interview notes to ensure the clarity of their intent. Written responses of students and recorded responses of teachers were carefully transcribed to maintain the integrity of the evaluation. Also, multiple data from various mediums were very important to solidify analysis and verify findings.

Accountability refers to "the responsible use of resources to produce value" (Yarborough et.al, 2011, p.226). This standard maintains sufficient documentation of the occurrence of the elements in the study. Teachers held PLCs on the book study; teachers' exit surveys along with the researcher's notes document the occurrence of these sessions. Additionally, the counselor keeps a record of all the children she sees as a part of her daily duties. This record along with students' exit surveys provide evidence of their participation. Precautions were taken to maintain the confidentiality of all data such as interview notes, observations, recordings, and informal conversations collected during the course of the study. This information was kept secure under lock and key and recordings were password protected.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. The nature of an applied research study incorporates the researcher as a participant in his own research. This dual role sharing as an administrator and a researcher is not a limitation of the study. However, this dual role as a participant researcher may have limited my objectivity as I gathered data through interviewing teachers and students who are subject to my professional role in supervising teachers' quality of work and administering discipline sanctions to students. For instance, during the study, teachers were asked about their likes and dislikes of the PLCs. Teachers always commented on their likes

and never left any comments for their dislikes. Perhaps the professional disposition between myself and the teachers silenced their dissatisfaction or dislikes. Though other means of data were gathered to answer the research questions, teachers' expressions on this question during the exit surveys could have contributed to additional organizational learning.

Another limitation included the design of the instruments used to gather data from students. While writing is a fundamental skill to communication, students in the second and third grades lack proficiency in these writing skills to articulate their responses in a manner that is legible and clear. These are skills that are difficult for students with no academic deficits; the lack of these skills is exacerbated in students who spend less time in the classroom for disciplinary sanctions. The use of a scribe or use of pictures to interpret students' responses would have been beneficial.

Time was another limitation as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which swept across the nation. Prolonged school closures, participants becoming ill with coronavirus, and quarantining all had an effect on the timeline of the study. Additionally, improving teachers' classroom management skills, adapting a curriculum to be culturally responsive, and changing habits takes time. Continuing this study over the next several years will paint a more realistic picture of the effects of the elements involved in the study.

Finally, as a novice researcher, my inexperience in conducting research posed a limitation.   Instrument selection, conducting interviews, and formatting interview questions are tedious techniques that come with experience and exposure to research practices. Improvement of these skills develops over time and with much practice.

Implications

The study was designed to decrease discipline referrals among African-American male

students while building teachers' capacity in culturally responsive practices. One implication of the study is teachers need more training in culturally responsive teaching. All of the teachers participating in the study had never received any professional development training in culturally responsive teaching nor was it a part of their teacher preparation program. As our school's population continues to diversify, it is becoming necessary that our lessons, curriculums, activities, and programs reflect the diversity seen in our schools. Our teachers who often live in completely different worlds from their students need to understand the culture of their students incorporate cultural elements within their classroom to build relationships with students to minimize classroom disruptive behaviors and maximize their academic achievement. This study demonstrated when positive relationships developed between students with a history of behavioral challenges and culturally responsive teachers, student behavior improved.

Another implication is given the right tools, teachers can be a tremendous help in decreasing the disparate rate at which African-American students receive exclusionary punishments. Teachers are first-responders to students' disruptive behavior. Teachers showing proficiency in culturally responsive strategies possess the tools necessary to keep many of these students out of the office and in their classroom. Possessing such skill allows teachers essentially to have a tremendous amount of latitude in how schools respond to the needs of students, whether it's tolerance, patience, understanding, or finding the resources to deal with the crux of the problem. Often school administrators are bound by board-approved policy handbooks that dictate the discipline sanctions children receive when students receive referrals. Zero tolerance and blanket discipline policies and the effects thereof, which tend to victimize African American students at disparate rates than their white peers, often force the hand of the law without delving into why's, how's, or causes of the infraction when, in fact, each situation is

different, and each child is different. Neglecting to deal with each situation as it occurs further negates the issues of equity that plague our nation's school, especially in communities that consist of predominantly African Americans and other students of color. Many of these students lack the access to cultural capital and social capital that typically is experienced and accessed by their white counterparts. Rather than perpetuate the effects of zero-tolerance policies, we must allow principals and administrators the leverage to use alternative options and other forms of discipline instead of exclusionary punishment to help students deal with the root of their problems.

Recommendations

The success of the program indicates a need for continuous application of the two elements utilized in this applied research study: book study on *The Dreamkeepers* and targeted counseling. Based on the data relating to the book study, the teachers involved in the study indicated how beneficial the PLC sessions were specifically related to the content of the book study. They further recommended all of the staff receive training on the book to become culturally responsive teachers. Therefore, we will continue to engage new cohorts of teachers in the book study. The initial cohort of teachers will be used as mentors of the programs to the new cohorts and will present occasionally on strategies they employed. In the future, new teachers will continue to lead these PLC sessions as their engagement in doing so generates rich, relevant discussions.

As it relates to the counseling element, the data indicates students benefitted from the targeted counseling sessions with the counselor. Additionally, teachers and students have expressed a need for ongoing sessions with the counselor even after the study's end. As a result, students who have gone through the program will continue with a minimum of one monthly

session of counseling. Students seem to need to continue this time with the counselor for continuous, ongoing reflection and review of skills obtained. Additional counseling sessions will be offered as needed. For new cohorts of students joining the program, their 10 sessions will progress through the Strong Kids curriculum as the original cohort progressed followed by monthly sessions at the end of their program as well. We must continue to give way for students' voices to be heard. Their sense of belonging and connectedness to the classroom and school is imperative to impacting their perspective of school and education in a positive way (Cook et al., 2018).

Another recommendation for the future of the study pertains to Appendix E, the Student Counseling Exit Survey/Questionnaire. The constructed response questions were difficult for second and third-grade students to respond to as their writing skills are not quite developed enough to formulate an easily interpreted response. In fact, the counselor mentioned that portion of the session took a tremendous amount of time. Instead, the use of pictures, multiple choice answers, or a scribe would simplify the process in trying to interpret students' responses and ensure their intent is what's actually perceived.

In moving forward, I expect to expand the program into the district's middle and high schools. As mentioned previously, the teachers involved in the study felt the strategies provided in the book study avail more to older children. The results of the study have the potential to impact older students in positive ways which may help to increase the district's graduation rate and improve the district's state accountability scores. This integration may begin on a voluntary basis with the original cohort of teachers serving as recruiters sharing their stories of challenges, success, and professional growth. Their testimonies and continuous involvement are valuable in helping other teachers realize how beneficial this can be to their own practice and professional

development.

Conclusion

This applied research study was designed to decrease referrals at Lake City Elementary School. The focus was geared to African American male students, and it would be accomplished through providing teachers with culturally responsive strategies and also providing students with targeted counseling to help establish and teach these students school-appropriate behaviors. While students' communities necessitate a behavior that contradicts school norms for the survival of the fittest, this study provides evidence that students could adapt and adjust to the expectations of their environment to display positive behaviors at school. Additionally, the study notes when teachers have an open mind, establish relationships with their students, and execute culturally responsive strategies, teachers can be a tremendous help in reducing the disparity which exists in school discipline among African American male students.   Also, when students are given a voice and the strategies to address the causes of their misbehavior, their overall behavior improves. Knowing this, educators must seek to employ these elements within their schools. As a school leader, one of our main focuses is to ensure the success and well-being of all students through the equity of educational opportunities and culturally responsive practices (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Our children's future is depending on our willingness to address the inequitable practices that exist in education and our country at large.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Teacher Interview Protocol (Pre-Implementation)

Research Topic: The disparity in discipline of black boys in elementary schools

Research Questions: In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers discipline their students, in particular black boys? What did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process? How do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*?

Conceptual Frameworks: cultural awareness, student-teacher relationship, gender disparities, disciplinary practices

Statement of Consent: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me about the discipline practices experienced by black boys. This information you share with me will be used to get a better understanding of the discipline experiences of black boys. Please be assured that your personal information will remain anonymous and will not be included in the report findings. I want you to feel that you can openly share your thoughts and perceptions.   Are you willing to proceed with this interview?

Teacher Interview Questions

Ice Breakers

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. What grade level and subjects have you taught?

3. What are you currently teaching?

Cultural Awareness

4. Describe the demographic makeup of your classroom.

5. How do ethnicities in you classroom account for discipline infractions?

6. How do you view yourself in comparison with your students?

7. Describe the parent involvement that exists among each ethnicity represented in your classroom.

8. How do you engage parents in your classroom?

9. What's your involvement in the community?

10. How do you incorporate cultural awareness in your lessons?

Student-teacher Relationships

11. What role do teachers play in student-teacher relationships?

12. Describe activities in which you and your students engage in that allows you to get an in-depth knowledge of them.

13. How do you cultivate relationships with your students inside the classroom?

14. How do you cultivate relationships with your students outside the school?

15. What are your expectations for all the students you teach?

16. How do your students view your relationships with them?

17. How do you incorporate social values in your classroom?

Gender Disparities

18. Describe the behavior of boys in your classroom.

19. Describe the behavior of girls in your classroom.

20. Describe your discipline strategies when dealing with misbehavior from boys in your classroom.

21. Describe your discipline strategies when dealing with misbehavior from girls in your classroom.

22. How would your student describe your discipline practices for all students?

Disciplinary Practices

23. Describe your philosophy on classroom management.

24. What are you classroom rules?

25. How did you develop these norms?

26. Describe your philosophy on discipline.

27. Describe your discipline practices in your classroom when a student violates your classroom rules?

28. How do you ensure every student is treated fairly?

    a. What are your thoughts on equity and equality in terms of discipline?

29. Is there an ethnic group and/or gender of students in your class that violates the established norms/rules in greater frequencies? Describe those behaviors.

30. What are some strategies in which you have tried to remedy the behavior?

31. What has been the most challenging discipline issue you've experienced?

    a. How did you handle the situation?

    b. In retrospect, would you have handled the situation differently? Explain.

32. How many referrals have you written this school year and for what infractions?

    a. What are your expectations for the school administrator in how he/she addresses infractions that you refer to the office?

Closing

33. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

Teacher PLC Survey/Questionnaire

1. How would you describe your experience today?
2. Was the information presented helpful?
3. Describe in your own words the strategy that was presented today.
4. How will you implement the strategy presented into your practice for managing your classroom?
5. What do you see as some of the challenges you will face as you incorporate the strategy from today?
6. What were your likes and dislikes about the strategy and session?
7. How can these meetings be improved?

APPENDIX C

Teacher Observation Checklist

Teacher's Name:	Observation Date
Objectives	**Evidence** (Check all that apply)
1. *Student Engagement* Do students appear to be actively engaged when you first walk in the room? Yes No	A. Independent Work B. Hands On C. Small Group D. Large Group E. Technology F. Other_____ Notes:
2. What strategy/strategies is(are) evident in the classroom from the book, *The Dreamkeepers?*	Strategy: _____ _____ _____ _____
3. *Instructional Practices* What instructional practices is the teacher choosing to use at this time to help students achieve standard?	A. Direct Instruction B. Teacher/Learner Interaction C. Assessment D. Sit at Desk E. Higher-Order Questioning F. Other_____ Notes:

4. *Student-Teacher Interactions* What evidence is there of positive teacher/student interactions?	A. Teacher demonstrates positive relationships with students B. Students demonstrates positive relationships C. Teacher and students speak courteously to one another D. Teacher praises students. E. Students give unsolicited praise to other students Notes:

APPENDIX D

Teacher Interview Protocol (Post-Implementation)

Research Topic: The disparity in discipline of black boys in elementary schools

Research Questions: In what ways did the book study using *The Dreamkeepers* change the way teachers discipline their students, in particular black boys? What did teachers perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the book study process? How do teachers incorporate strategies from the book study, *The Dreamkeepers*?

Conceptual Frameworks: cultural awareness, student-teacher relationship, gender disparities, disciplinary practices

Statement of Consent: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me about the discipline practices experienced by black boys. This information you share with me will be used to get a better understanding of the discipline experiences of black boys. Please be assured that your personal information will remain anonymous and will not be included in the report findings. I want you to feel that you can openly share your thoughts and perceptions.   Are you willing to proceed with this interview?

Teacher Interview Questions

Ice Breakers

1. How is your year going?

2. What skill(s) are you currently teaching this week?

Cultural Awareness

3. Describe the demographic makeup of your classroom.

4. How do ethnicities in you classroom account for discipline infractions?

5. How do you view yourself in comparison with your students?

6. Describe the parent involvement that exists among each ethnicity represented in your classroom.

7. How do you engage parents in your classroom?

8. What's your involvement in the community?

9. How do you incorporate cultural awareness in your lessons?

Student-teacher Relationships

10. What role do teachers play in student-teacher relationships?

11. Describe activities in which you and your students engage in that allows you to get an in-depth knowledge of them.

12. How do you cultivate relationships with your students inside the classroom?

13. How do you cultivate relationships with your students outside the school?

14. What are your expectations for all the students you teach?

15. How do your students view your relationships with them?

16. How do you incorporate social values in your classroom?

Gender Disparities

17. Describe the behavior of boys in your classroom.

18. Describe the behavior of girls in your classroom.

19. Describe your discipline strategies when dealing with misbehavior from boys in your classroom.

20. Describe your discipline strategies when dealing with misbehavior from girls in your classroom.

21. How would your student describe your discipline practices for all students?

Disciplinary Practices

22. Describe your philosophy on classroom management.

23. What are your classroom rules?

24. How did you develop these norms?

25. Describe your philosophy on discipline.

26. Describe your discipline practices in your classroom when a student violates your classroom rules?

27. How do you ensure every student is treated fairly?

    a. What are your thoughts on equity and equality in terms of discipline?

28. Is there an ethnic group and/or gender of students in your class that violates the established norms/rules in greater frequencies? Describe those behaviors.

29. What are some strategies in which you have tried to remedy the behavior?

30. What has been the most challenging discipline issue you've experienced?

    a. How did you handle the situation?

    b. In retrospect, would you have handled the situation differently? Explain.

31. How many referrals have you written this school year and for what infractions?

    a. What are your expectations for the school administrator in how he/she addresses infractions that you refer to the office?

32. How has the book study on *The Dreamkeepers* influence your disciplinary practices?

33. What additional resources are needed in order to adequately address the needs of minority students identified in the book *The Dreamkeepers*?

34. How has the book study affected your number of referrals?

35. What about the book study has contributed to this outcome?

36. What were some strengths of the book study that could be implemented into your classroom with ease?

37. What were some weaknesses of the book study that you found challenging to implement into your classroom?

38. Where are you in incorporating the book study into your classroom culture?

39. What implications does the book study have on its sustainability in your classroom?

40. Would you recommend this book study to other teachers? Why or why not?

Closing

41. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX E

Student Counseling Exit Survey/Questionnaire

1. What was today's lesson about?
2. The next time I am presented with a challenging situation, today's lesson says I should do what?
3. The next time I am presented with a challenging situation, I will_____

   _____

4. I still have questions about _____

   _____

   _____

5. What did you like most about today's lesson?
6. What did you least like about today's lesson?

Daily Behavioral Checklist

Rating Scale 2=Great 1=Needs Improvement 0=Try Again	7:45-9:00	9:00-10:00	10:00-11:00	11:00-12:00	12:00-1:00	1:00-2:00	2:00-2:45
Be Respectful: Follows teacher directions/class rules Speaks appropriately to peers/adults Answers questions asked by teachers Keeps fidgeting to a minimum	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
Be Responsible: Begins/Complete 85% of class work Participates in class Stays focused during instruction Stays focused during independent work Stays awake	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
Be Safe: Keeps hands, feet, and objects to self Remains in seat Uses materials appropriately	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
Total Points							

Office Referral?   Yes   No

Daily Goal_____   Points Earned_____   Was Daily Goal Reached? Yes   No

Comments:_____

_____

_____

Counselor's Signature:_____

Teacher's Signature:_____

APPENDIX G

Post-Program Focus Group Interview

1. How would you describe your behavior choices prior to the counseling sessions?
2. Has your behavior changed since counseling? If so, how has it changed?
3. How would your teacher describe your behavior before your coming to counseling? Since you've started counseling?
4. What were some of your favorite parts of the counseling sessions?
5. What were some things you disliked about the counseling sessions?
6. Did you feel comfortable talking to the counselor?
7. Do you like your teacher? What are some things you like about her? What are some things you dislike?
8. Do you like your school? What are some things you like about the school?

Pre-Program Focus Group Interview

1. How would you describe your behavior choices at school this year and last year?

2. How would your teacher describe your behavior up to this point? You may include last school's behavior.

3. Do you like your teacher? What are some things you like about her? What are some things you dislike?

4. Do you like your school? What are some things you like about the school? What are some of your dislikes toward school?

VITA

Reginald Herrington

EDUCATION

2021
Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership K-12, The University of Mississippi

2010
Education Specialist, Educational Leadership K-12, The University of Mississippi

2008
Master of Arts in Teaching, Delta State University

2005
Bachelor of Science, Biology, Delta State University

2002
High School Diploma, Grenada High School

ACADEMIC EMPLOYEMENT

2015- Present
Assistant Principal, Grenada School District

2013-2015
Assistant Principal, North Panola School District

2011-2013
Teacher of Chemistry, Grenada School District

2005-2013
Teacher of Grade 8 Science, Grenada School District

PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS

4-6   Elementary Education, Mississippi License

7-12   Biology, Mississippi License

7-12   Chemistry, Mississippi License

Administrator, Career Level, Mississippi License

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

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AWARDS

Assistant Principal of the Year, North Panola School District, 2015

Grade 8 Teacher of the Year, Grenada Middle School, 2013