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A Study of the Impact of Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in the Virtual Middle School Setting

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Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

A considerable amount of research regarding best practices for successful disciplinary practices and programs that schools utilize to address middle school student behavior exists. Two of the most often cited and recommended practices are the Culturally Responsive practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Research on how Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS are used in the virtual middle school environment was scarce. Middle school teachers participated in semi-structured interviews to determine whether or not, how, and to what extent Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS were implemented in the middle school virtual setting. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the virtual learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The secondary purpose of this study assessed how practices and procedures have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings. Four unique themes emerged from the data, which included: student choice, social-emotional learning, technology, and virtual meeting spaces. An unexpected theme emerged from the data, which was that technology and the virtual environment enabled deeper personal connection to occur between teachers and students. Findings include recommendations for increased use of technology and student choice, continued use of virtual meeting spaces when returning to in-person instruction, as well as use of digital recordings for instruction and reference.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Intervention, Middle School, Virtual School, Discipline Practices, Teacher Interviews

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study sought to understand how the virtual learning environment has influenced middle school classrooms. Chapter One examines the research context of this dissertation. The relevance and necessity of such a study are discussed in more detail. This qualitative study includes new perspectives relevant to contemporary educational needs.

Problem of Practice

During these unprecedented times, both the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and social justice movements during the year 2020 have shed light upon many cultural, societal, and systemic issues inherent within the educational system in the United States. The protests and civil unrest across the country have brought into focus the longstanding history of systemic racism in our nation and have spotlighted the shortcomings of our educational system's ability to build equitable, culturally responsive, and trauma-responsive schools. In addition to the social justice movements, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic had also shed further light on the already disproportionately affected students from marginalized groups (Keels, 2020). Never have educational behavior supports been more essential for all learners, particularly those experiencing trauma (Washington, 2020).

Historically, ethnic minorities, English Language Learners, foster youth among others face educational barriers; furthermore, there are several examples of literature on how these barriers affect student achievement, exclusionary discipline, and social-emotional learning needs (Chan, 2003; Curran, 2016; Dutton, Ginkel, & Starzomski, 1995; Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Gordon & Fefer, 2019; Hirschfield, 2018; Nocera, Whitbread, & Nocera., 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2017; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000). The ultimate goal of educational programs is to

produce knowledgeable students who are contributing members of society; however, punitive school disciplinary practices traditionally used in the educational system have created barriers to this very goal (Weaver & Swank, 2020). While utilizing punitive measures, educators may not understand the obstacles that many of their students face or the context of student behavior (Weaver & Swank, 2020). A central concern in today's schools is how to best reach all students, especially in times of crisis (Keels, 2020). Extensive recommendations exist concerning traditional in-person learning. However, very little research exists on virtual learning environments regarding instruction, discipline practices, and the needs of these specific student groups. Examining experiences within this context is also an opportunity to enhance the instructional and disciplinary practices for all learning environments in schools as a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Scholars have proposed that the implementation of restorative justice and culturally responsive discipline practices is what is needed for all students, not just during these tumultuous times, but in future instruction whether virtually or in-person (Weaver & Swank, 2020). Students must have access to participate in daily educational experiences, as research has shown that a shift from punitive discipline to restorative practices allows for an environment of inclusion with reductions in suspensions and expulsions and better overall academic achievement (Chan, 2003; Curran, 2016; Dutton et al., 1995; Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Gordon & Fefer, 2019; Hirschfield, 2018; Nocera et al., 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2017; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000). This is an opportunity for schools to develop better disciplinary practices and learning environments for increased student success because of the novel experiences from the virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a challenge in public education: schools need to support learning in virtual online learning environments for students from diverse backgrounds, languages, and cultures while also providing corrective instruction for unwanted student behaviors. Schools who implement a virtual online learning environment must address the issue of inequitable exclusionary discipline incidents with specific populations of students, including but not limited to students of color, English language learners, students from low SES, and foster children.

The site of this proposed study was a public school district in Southern California. Currently, the use of the Culturally Responsive practices and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) in the school district featured in this study has been effective in providing instruction and a supportive discipline structure to students during in-person instruction; however, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the discipline methodology in these schools when it moved to a virtual learning environment. New instructional and disciplinary approaches were needed to adapt to how students interact, learn, and behave in virtual learning environments. It was important to learn how these adjustments to instruction and disciplinary approaches in the virtual environment can be applied to future in-person learning environments.

Significance of the Study

During the 2019-2020 school year, California enrolled 999,764 middle and junior high school students at 1,331 public schools (California Department of Education, 2020a). The number of middle and junior high school teachers in 2018-2019 was 47,374 (California Department of Education, 2020a). According to Kidsdata (2019), there were discrepancies between ethnic groups regarding exclusionary discipline data. Black students were expelled from school at a 92.2 rate per 1,000 and Hispanic/Latino students were suspended at a 35.8 rate per 1,000, as compared with a 29.8 rate per 1,000 for their White peers during the 2018-2019

school year in the State of California. These numbers had a higher discrepancy in Riverside County, where in the 2018-2019 school year Black and Hispanic/Latino students were suspended at a much higher rate than their White peers. Particularly important to note is that Black students comprise only 5.5% of the State of California population, whereas Hispanic/Latino students are 51.9% and White students are 25.8% of the population.

The two other groups of students impacted by exclusionary discipline are the foster youth and English Language Learner populations (California Department of Education, 2020b). In 2018-2019, 1.2 million K-12 public school students in California were identified as English Language Learners. Of these 1.2 million students, a total of 75 language groups are represented. These two groups have notably lower rates of high school completion which is surprising when compared with the numbers of the overall population; in 2018, 94% of young adults aged 18 to 24 had completed high school compared to only 90% in 2010 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2019). According to Barrat and Berliner (2013), foster youth in California public schools have the lowest graduation rate of any subgroup.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. Moreover, the purpose of this study was to determine whether or not Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS implemented by teachers are supportive in a middle school setting. The study assessed how practices and procedures have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings. A focus in the study considered the impact of the two classroom settings with student groups who have been historically underserved and/or disproportionately disciplined in the school setting, through inclusion or

exclusion from the classroom. To meet the purpose of this study, the following questions were explored:

1) How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during in-person classroom instruction?
2) How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during virtual classroom instruction?
3) How do teachers understand their experiences in the virtual classroom environment as impacting their instruction, classroom management, or discipline practices when schools return to in-person classroom instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Definition of Terms

The study will be guided by the definitions to the following related terms:

Culturally Responsive Teaching. Culturally Responsive Teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary discipline is the use of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions as a disciplinary practice which removes students from the classroom due to behaviors ranging from minor infractions to more serious behavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Expulsion. Expulsion is the permanent removal of a student from their regular educational setting due to a violation of serious school rules, policies, or laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA is a law that allows free appropriate public education to children with disabilities in the United States and ensures special education and related services for those children (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is a systematic, multitiered prevention framework used to create and reinforce proper school culture, routines, and behaviors essential for all students enrolled in that school to accomplish positive social and academic success (Pas, Ryoo, Musci & Bradshaw, 2019).

School climate. School climate is the social atmosphere of the school which consists of values, interpersonal relationships, norms, goals, instructional practices, and organizational structures that comprise the experience of school life (National School Climate Center, 2020)

School culture. School Culture is the beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, relationships, and written and unwritten rules that influence the way a school operates (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

School-to-Prison Pipeline. The disproportionate tendency of students from disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups to be removed from the public school system and become incarcerated due to inequitable educational and disciplinary practices, such as zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL is the process of developing interpersonal skills and emotion management to better cope with challenges through self-awareness, responsible decision-making, maintaining positive relationships, and impulse control practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Suspension. Suspension is the exclusion of a student from their educational setting for a set length of time due to a violation of school policies, rules, or laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Virtual instruction. Virtual instruction is the educational interaction that occurs entirely online using electronic delivery of instruction to students while the teacher is in a different physical location; it can occur asynchronously or in real time (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2016).

Brief Overview of Prior Research

Historically, school discipline has implemented a wide range of practices from the use of disciplinary exclusion through shame or corporal punishment to the more contemporary usage of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Chan, 2003; Dutton et al., 1995; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000). Exclusionary discipline is well-known to for its disproportionate use with students of color and other vulnerable student populations (Curran, 2016; Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018; Gershoff et al., 2018; Gordon & Fefer, 2019; Hirschfield, 2018; Nocera et al., 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2017).

To counteract disproportionate use of discipline practices with vulnerable student populations, intervention systems and frameworks that focus on academic or behavioral issues, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) three-tiered framework, have been used in recent years (Childs, Kincaid, George, & Gage, 2016; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009). It is important to note that PBIS implementation with fidelity is necessary for positive effect on these vulnerable student populations (Bal, 2018; Kim, McIntosh, Mercer, & Nese, 2018; Noltemeyer, Palmer, James, & Petrasek, 2019; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009). Additionally, the

creation of a positive school climate in conjunction with the PBIS three-tier system of interventions with fidelity are vital components to the reduction of unwanted behavior in schools (Acosta et al., 2019; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pikeral, 2009).

In order to understand the importance of this study, research and background on the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences upon instruction and discipline is needed (Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). There is prior research regarding virtual instruction available; however, specific research on the widespread implementation of virtual school and disciplinary practices is not readily available. Due to the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for virtual educational environments, some articles discussed are not from peer-reviewed resources and require further research (Belsha, 2020; Keels, 2020; Washington, 2020).

Positionality

Growing up in Southern California, I witnessed firsthand the disproportionate treatment of students from minority populations. I come from two different ethnic backgrounds. People I interacted with would unknowingly make prejudiced remarks about members of my own ethnic background. I attended public K-12 schools that did not have a large population of minority students and were predominantly white. I also witnessed incidents of unfair disciplinary practices toward classmates who did not fit in with the majority ethnic group, cultural norms, or biased behavioral expectations in school.

I attended one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the nation for my undergraduate studies. This experience helped shape who I am and helped to broaden my understanding of the diversity in our country, as well as provided an opportunity for me to consider my own implicit biases and internalized prejudices. I studied psychology for my

bachelor's degree focusing on culture, cognition, and behavior. These studies led me to become interested in educational psychology, which led me to obtaining my teaching credentials. Immediately after completion of the teaching credential program, I was hired as a sixth-grade teacher in my current school district. For the past 18 years, I have instructed sixth, seventh, and eighth grade in elementary and middle school. I have taught at five different school sites over the years. I have taught all subject areas because I hold a multiple subject teaching credential and single subject authorizations in Mathematics and English.

Working at five different school sites has provided me with a unique perspective of behavioral disciplinary practices, as I have served as a teacher under the guidance of 14 different principals and assistant principals. This experience has afforded me with a look into various leadership styles and approaches to discipline. After obtaining my teaching credentials, I continued my education and obtained an accelerated Master of Arts degree in Educational Administration degree and California Administrative Credential. I obtained two additional graduate degrees through virtual online learning environments at two universities: Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing arts and an Educational Specialist degree in Transformational Leadership. Both of my most recent degrees were obtained through virtual learning environments.

In addition to my employment as a public-school teacher, I have also served as a lecturer and online professor for almost a decade at two universities. Both universities utilized virtual online learning environments for students through learning management systems (LMS). I have created asynchronous online learning experiences and content for students, as well as provided synchronous instruction for nine different masters level courses. This experience imparts to me the understanding of virtual online education practices from creation, implementation, and

instructional viewpoints. My current and prior educational experiences have provided me with the awareness and understanding of the importance of virtual learning environments and it is the reason I seek to use this knowledge to inform future disciplinary practices at the middle school level.

Limitations

While it is important to view this study as an entry point on understanding novel practices in the virtual instructional learning environments and methods to decrease exclusionary discipline, it is important to note that there were limitations to this study. This study considered only middle schools in one Southern California public school district that implements Culturally Responsive practices and the PBIS approach. Nevertheless, the information gleaned from this study provides a benefit for all middle schools, as it offers insights and understanding as to that which is working in regard to supporting student learning and managing student behaviors. Further research regarding experiences with Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS in the virtual elementary or high school should be examined. Despite the limitations, the study allowed for the possibility to impart insightful information and direction for future discipline practices.

The Study Design: Paradigm, Methods, Procedures, and Findings

The qualitative research design used in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol with virtual middle school teachers who have been trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The interviews resulted in the narratives of participants that discussed the following: how have teachers applied their training to instruction and disciplinary practices in the in-person classroom environments, how have teachers applied their training to instruction and disciplinary practices in the virtual classroom environments, and how might the experiences in the virtual classroom environment impact teachers' instruction, classroom management, or

discipline practices when schools return to in-person classroom instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the questions posed in the semi-structured interview directly related to the research questions asked in this study. Participants were asked the same open-ended questions, and depending upon their responses, follow-up questions were added to elicit more detailed participant responses (Mason, 2002).

The study took place in the middle schools within a Southern California public K-12 school district. The eight to10 participants in this study came from various school sites in the district. The sampling was drawn from middle schools across the school district to provide diverse viewpoints and a range of experiences. The sampling strategy was to distribute a survey to all middle school teachers in the district. Respondents answered questions, such as: total years teaching, years in the district, geographic location of their school, years PBIS trained, and years using Culturally Responsive practices. Teachers were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Participants were chosen from those who indicated willingness to participate in an interview. Data provided from each individual experience through a semi-structured interview were compared to derive commonalities in theme, similar perspectives, differences in perspective, as well as insights into understanding (Mason, 2002). The participants in this study come from various middle school sites in the district. Participants were provided with pseudonyms for confidentiality in this study. The strategy was to select a sample of teachers from each of the different geographical locations in the district.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The purpose of this study was also to determine whether or not, how, and to what extent Culturally Responsive practices and

PBIS procedures implemented by teachers were supportive in a middle school setting. The study assessed how practices and procedures have been used in both in-person and virtual classroom settings. The data gathering approach was to identify how the virtual learning environment may inform future disciplinary practices in middle school. An interpretivist approach was used to evaluate the data in order to find out teacher viewpoints and understanding; questions regarding their personal experiences during in-person and virtual instruction were asked in the interview process. Participant responses were analyzed using data coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). From this data coding, analytic results were interpreted (Mason, 2002). The qualitative research gained from the interviews provided data that can be analyzed.

This study determined how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. This study aimed to determine whether or not Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS procedures implemented by teachers are supportive in a middle school setting. The study assessed how practices and procedures have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings. The four themes that emerged from the study data were student choice, social-emotional learning, technology, and virtual meeting spaces. An unexpected theme emerged from the data, which was that technology and the virtual environment enabled deeper personal connection to occur between teachers and students.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study regarding discipline practices in a virtual middle school. It discussed a brief overview of prior research, the research questions, key terms, purpose, limitations, and design for this study. The following chapter is a literature review, which examines the historical context that caused the development of exclusionary discipline and

explores the intervention practices and approaches that have followed. The literature review demonstrates the need for alternative discipline practices in the place of zero tolerance and the importance of social-emotional learning and the Culturally Responsive approach to Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature explores the history of school discipline and exclusionary discipline practices and how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lens through which traditional systems are viewed. The first body of literature discusses a historical review of school discipline from the use of disciplinary exclusion through shame or corporal punishment to the more contemporary usage of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Chan, 2003; Dutton et al., 1995; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000). The second body of literature discusses exclusionary discipline and its disproportionate use with students of color and other vulnerable student populations (Curran, 2016; Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018; Gershoff et al., 2018; Gordon & Fefer, 2019; Hirschfield, 2018; Nocera et al., 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2017).

The third body of literature also explores the role of intervention systems and frameworks which formal research studies have found positive outcomes with students with academic or behavioral issues, particularly the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) three-tiered framework (Childs et al., 2016; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009). Within this body of literature, the processes of the PBIS management structures are discussed, as well as the necessity for its implementation with fidelity (Bal, 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009). In this literature, the creation of a positive school climate as another vital component to the reduction of unwanted behavior in schools in conjunction with the PBIS three-tier system of interventions with fidelity is examined (Acosta et al., 2019; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Cohen et al., 2009).

The final section in the literature review delves into the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences upon instruction and discipline (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

2020). There is prior literature regarding virtual instruction available; however, research on the widespread implementation of virtual school and disciplinary practices is not readily available. Due to the unique nature of the situation, some of the articles and research discussed are not from peer-reviewed resources and require further research (Belsha, 2020; Keels, 2020; Washington, 2020). The research and ideas discussed regarding discipline, structures, and practices serve to outline direction for next steps.

History of School Discipline Practices

Traditionally, school discipline practices in the United States were created with the intention to set limitations and guide proper or socially acceptable behaviors for their students (Chan, 2003). Many school discipline practices were punitive and focused upon punishment in the form of shame, corporal punishment, or exclusion, such as the use of the dunce cap, paddle, or placement in a corner (Chan, 2003; Dutton, Ginkel, & Starzomski, 1995; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000). These practices did not take into account cultural differences, economic resources, biases, or prejudices (Skiba & Knesting, 2002). Such forms of discipline have been shown ineffective in decades of research and have perpetuated racially inequitable and overly harsh punishments and consequences for students of color (Chan, 2003; Dutton, Ginkel, & Starzomski, 1995; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000).

Shame based discipline policies are harmful forms of punishment (Weijers, 2000). For example, Weijers (2000) wrote, “Shame, however, leads you outside the community to moral exile” (p. 69). Brene Brown (2006), a well-known researcher on shame, has noted the long-term detrimental effects that shame as punishment can have on physical and mental health, risk-taking, vulnerability, and resilience. There is substantial research that supports Brown’s findings

that shame as punishment has damaging and lifelong negative effects on individuals (Chan, 2003; Dutton, et al., 1995; Good, 1999; Stuewig, et al., 2015; Weijers, 2000). Shame is a highly ineffective practice to change unwanted behaviors, particularly in regard to vulnerable populations (Stuewig et al., 2015). Counterintuitively, shame discipline puts these students at risk increased levels of risky, illegal, and otherwise inadvisable behaviors in adolescence and young adulthood, such as unsafe sex, alcohol use, illegal drugs, etc. Children's exposure to shame as punishment is a predictor for unwanted and risky behaviors (Stuewig et al., 2015).

Corporal punishment was once a regularly utilized form of school discipline. In fact, during a session of the United States Supreme Court in 1977, corporal punishment was ruled constitutional. The United States Supreme Court provided states with the opportunity to resolve whether corporal punishment would be deemed lawful and permissible in schools. After this ruling, the majority of states however prohibited corporal punishment from public schools (Gershoff et al., 2018). According to data from the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights, the most recent national estimates show that over 160,000 students were physically punished in public schools during the 2015-2016 school year. The majority of students physically punished are disproportionately minority students or those with disabilities. Black students were 51% more likely to be corporally punished than their White counterparts in states that allowed corporal punishment. Children with disabilities were more likely to be corporally punished than non-disabled peers in states that allowed corporal punishment. The implementation of corporal punishment has since declined from 4% in 1977 to less than 0.5% in 2016. Of the students in the 0.5% in 2016, the majority were students from minority groups.

In reaction to the disuse of corporal punishment, most public schools and state education departments have adopted other disciplinary consequences (Skiba et al., 2002). These alternative

discipline practices included the implementation of exclusionary discipline, which involves the use of after-school detention, front office referrals, in-school suspensions or alternative classroom placements, at-home suspensions, and ultimately expulsion from the school. Despite being founded on the purpose of instructing students on boundaries and socially acceptable behavior, school discipline frameworks based on zero-tolerance policies have historically failed students through their inability to decrease exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions or expulsions, as initially intended (Skiba et al., 2002).

In the 1990s, schools across the country initiated zero-tolerance exclusionary discipline practices intended to impose stricter restrictions on students, which ultimately led to an unexpected rise in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Curran, 2016). Schools also hired police officers and adopted rigid disciplinary codes (Hirschfield, 2018; Javdani, 2019). Zero-tolerance school discipline practices typically require consequences, such as suspensions or expulsions, for specific perceived behaviors regardless of the incident's circumstances. Zero-tolerance discipline practices did not produce equitable outcomes for all students (Curran, 2016). Curran (2016) also found that the suspension rate for Black students was three times that for White students, as well as linked to continued disciplinary infractions, decreased academic achievement, and school dropout. The increased number of full-time School Police Officers and increased police officer presence in schools has "coincided with a growth in criminalizing student behavior" (Javdani, 2019, p.2). Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croniger (2007) considered the implications and uncovered racial, socioeconomic, and gender disparities in rates of suspension and expulsion, and that those with "psychological, financial, and social disadvantages are most likely to experience disciplinary exclusion" (p.34). Indicative of the prior research studies on the exclusionary practices, School Police Officers are statistically more likely to be

employed at schools that serve higher populations of students of color, which are also "disproportionately targeted by exclusionary discipline practices" (Javadani, 2019, p.2). Higher exclusionary discipline rates concerning suspensions and expulsions are linked to lower academic achievement (Brown, 2006).

The school-to-prison pipeline has been detrimental to students of minority ethnic groups (Belser, Shillingford, & Joe, 2016). Belser et al. (2016) assert that beginning in preschool and continuing into high school Black students are suspended at a higher rate than White students. Because of these apparent discrepancies, interventions were developed with the intent to prevent exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as suspensions and expulsions. Skiba and Knesting (2002) assert that there was no demonstration in their data to indicate that suspensions and expulsions lead to positive changes in student behavior or safer schools. In summary, the historical methodologies regarding school discipline practices do not work for all students, particularly vulnerable populations, such as students of color and students with disabilities (Belser et al., 2016; Skiba & Knesting, 2002).

Exclusionary Discipline and Effects

Exclusionary discipline is the act of removing a student from the classroom. Moreover, exclusionary discipline is the practice of dismissing a student from their regular educational setting using disciplinary actions, such as office discipline referrals (ODR), suspensions, and expulsions. This removal from the classroom takes students away from instruction and often puts these students at-risk for academic failure, school dropout, and even future incarceration (Gage, Lee, Grasley-Boy, & Peshak George, 2018). Researchers found a massive economic burden regarding suspensions; Rumberger and Losen (2017) estimated the economic drain suspending students had when they followed a cohort of California 10th graders for 3 years.

Rumberger and Losen (2017) also discovered that only 60% of students who had been suspended would graduate from high school, compared with 83% of students who were not suspended from school. To put this in financial terms, the economic cost of the high number of students who do not graduate from high school is a $2.7 billion burden over the lifetime of that cohort.

More than economic effects, exclusionary discipline can be detrimental for students with special needs. Students with disabilities are more prone to suspensions than their non-disabled peers (Nocera et al., 2014). Hallett et al. (2019) found that students with disabilities received more than double the suspensions than students without disabilities, which is detrimental to these students' educational needs. Often, students with disabilities take much longer to learn concepts than their peers, so time away from the classroom can have much more complicated effects (Hallett, et al., 2019; Nocera et al., 2014). Educational disparity and racial disproportionality in schools are well documented for students of color in the United States (Curran, 2016; Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018; Gershoff et al., 2018; Gordon & Fefer, 2019; Hirschfield, 2018; Nocera et al., 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2017). School discipline policies based on a framework of zero-tolerance did not reduce suspensions or expulsions as initially intended (Nocera et al., 2014). At the same time, these exclusionary policies have resulted in more students removed from instruction due to reactive disciplinary action (Gage, Lee, Grasley-Boy, & Peshak George, 2018). Hallett et al. (2019) suggested that these policies amplify the achievement gap and detrimentally influence the development of students of color.

Zero-tolerance policies describe specific behaviors and the corresponding punishments that are associated; however, this practice does not consider a student's culture or circumstances (Curran, 2016). School administrators and teachers have substantial discretion in administering these punishments on a case-by-case basis. For example, a teacher's declaration of specific

horseplay or roughhousing as physical violence could prompt a zero-tolerance discipline response, which the interpretation of the horseplay as violent would be susceptible to that teacher's own implicit biases. Research on these subconsciously held stereotypes, called implicit biases, are typical toward students of color and have resulted in discriminatory treatment and disproportionate disciplinary actions (Curran, 2016). Ultimately, empirical evidence exists that Black students are given harsher punishments for smaller infractions or behaviors that involved a subjective judgment from a teacher or administrator (Curran, 2016; Nocera et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002).

Implicit Biases in Discipline Practices

In the context of the public school system, severe exclusionary punishments such as suspensions and expulsion have long-standing and detrimental consequences for the impacted students (Curran, 2016; Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). A large body of research exists that shows the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with disabled and students of color; therefore, the academic and lifelong adverse outcomes, and equity in disciplinary practices should be considered (Bergerson, 2003; Chadderton, 2013; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Curran, 2016; Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). Because society has influenced how our legal and governmental structures function within a biased culture, racial inequalities, poverty, and crime are symptomatic of these structures (Crenshaw et al., 1995). While understanding implicit biases of educators, recognizing the evidence for potentially negative impacts of exclusionary discipline is essential for educators and school administrators, which can result in a better understanding of student behaviors (Bergerson, 2003; Chadderton, 2013; Crenshaw et al., 1995).

According to the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2020), "implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (para. 1). There is evidence to suggest that understated, inadvertent bias can cause harm and decreases trust. Implicit bias is measurable (Boysen, 2010). "Implicit bias is a possible explanation for the dissociation between intentional and unintentional discrimination manifested in aversive racism and microaggression" (Boysen, 2010, p.211). Educators must understand their own implicit biases to better serve their students (Boysen, 2010). As described in the research from Jacoby-Senghor, Sinclair, and Shelton (2016), when implicit biases lay the foundation to school discipline practices, it becomes not only a civil rights issue, but it affects academics. Jacoby-Senghor et al. explained that teachers' implicit bias produces distinct racial disparities in academic achievement. Also, research showed that biased teacher expectations toward their minority students negatively affected student outcomes.

Further research on implicit bias by Ispa-Landa (2018) showed that when "teachers lack knowledge and skills about how best to manage student behavior, the effects of implicit and explicit racial bias may be especially pronounced" (p.385). Because of implicit racial bias, educational researchers have called for "social-psychological interventions" (p.386). Educational researchers have advocated that students receive interventions necessary for behavioral change while acknowledging one's implicit biases. Another critical factor is "increasing teachers' empathy for students may be a reasonable way to reduce implicit racial bias" (p.386). Policymakers and educational leaders must provide implicit bias programs for teachers (Ispa-Landa, 2018).

In the past three decades, numerous studies analyzed the impact of systemic racism on ethnic minority students (Chadderton, 2013; Gordon et al., 2019; Knaus, 2009; Ladson-Billings,

1998; Lensmire et al., 2013; Nocera et al., 2014; Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). The research showed the essential need for the educational framework to understand how biases operate in the school discipline system and how it will continue to shape the lives of students far past the public school system (Chadderton, 2013; Gordon et al., 2019; Knaus, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Nocera et al., 2014; Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). Despite the laws that were "intended to provide equal opportunity, people of color still face racism at individual, structural, and institutional levels" (Bergerson, 2003, p. 52-53). Privilege exists in society as all systems are intrinsically based upon an assumed White norm; furthermore, most classroom teachers in the United States identify as White (Chadderton, 2013; Lensmire et al., 2013). Therefore, one of the most challenging conundrums is how do educators eliminate implicit biases, systemic racism, educational disparities, and teach diversity when many educators themselves have positions of privilege and do not identify with a minority group. White educators must educate themselves on methodologies for instruction to eliminate the inequalities between their diverse student populations to best serve all learners (Lensmire et al., 2013).

There is a difficulty when White educators do not consider race, as it does not affect their everyday realities like it does their minority students (Bergerson, 2003). White educators who avert attention from the issues faced by people of color, intentional or not, are detrimental to the educational system (Sleeter, 1993). Research by Hamdon (2008) explained that educators must become anti-racist to counteract the adverse effects of privilege and implicit biases. Educators must implement self-reflective, critical practices that discontinue perpetuating biased structures (Bergerson, 2003). One of the essential elements for educators to become anti-racist is to

recognize their own implicit biases, particularly when considering student instruction and discipline practices (Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2016).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a systematic, multitiered prevention framework used to create and reinforce proper school culture, routines, and behaviors essential for all students enrolled in that school to accomplish positive social and academic success (Pas et al., 2019; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009). PBIS is a student behavior structure and discipline practice derived from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018). With the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, public schools in all states and districts were instructed to assess disproportionality and allocate 15% of federal funds to eliminate it through prevention and early intervening services (Bal, 2018). According to Childs et al. (2016), more than twenty-one thousand schools implement PBIS in the United States.

On January 8, 2014, the United States Department of Education released guidelines advocating the use of restorative justice practices, such as PBIS. These protocols suggested that schools reconsider their current discipline policies and discontinue the use of zero-tolerance policies, which often removed students from class due to suspensions and expulsions for minor infractions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Of the restorative practices available to school districts, one of the most popular chosen was PBIS due to its applied behavioral theory, research, and practice (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009). According to Sugai and Simonsen (2012), PBIS is grounded in the tenets of theoretical behavior analysis, deterrent and preventive methodology, and the intrinsic values of positive behavior support, which intentionally increases

positive academic and social behavior for a diverse student population through the use of data, progress-monitoring, evidence-based practices, curriculum improvement and organizational systems to best meet the needs of all students.

PBIS Three-Tiered Intervention Process

Within the structure of PBIS, a three-tiered intervention process exists, where each tier becomes increasingly individualized (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018). Tier One interventions consist of proactive practices that students learn to avoid unwanted behavior that presents schoolwide. Tier One interventions are the processes and procedures provided to all students as primary prevention for behavior or academic needs daily, such as schoolwide behavior expectations, discipline structures, and rewards (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). Other examples of PBIS Tier One interventions are rules, routines, and physical arrangements established and instructed by school employees to thwart first incidents of the behaviors the school intends to change (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018).

Tier Two interventions are the specific supports needed for small groups of students to decrease problematic behaviors. These are the targeted interventions a school or teacher may use; furthermore, students receiving the Tier Two interventions tend to be in at-risk populations (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018). The purpose of Tier Two interventions is to support the students who did not respond to the Tier One universal supports (Center for SWPBS, 2011). Tier Three interventions are student-specific individualized interventions that affect only one student at a time. This Tier is applied to individual students on a case-by-case basis; interventions used are for single use only (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). The Tier Two and Tier Three interventions are often utilized through the

professional learning community approach involving problem-solving teams consisting of classroom teachers, administrators, counselors, school psychologists, special educators, and intervention coordinators (Center for SWPBS, 2011).

Implementation of PBIS with Fidelity

The level at which the fundamentals of PBIS are put into action as intended is the measure of the implementation of PBIS with fidelity (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). Schools with high fidelity had fewer disciplinary exclusions than those with low fidelity (Kim et al., 2018). The research conducted to discover the connections between fidelity and student outcomes have included academic achievement. Studies on the enactment of PBIS with fidelity demonstrate a positive correlation between "fidelity and positive academic and behavioral outcomes" (Noltemeyer et al., 2019, p. 82). Reductions in problem behaviors due to implementation of PBIS with fidelity create a favorable learning environment. Reductions in problematic student behaviors due to proper implementation are that PBIS with fidelity improves academic achievement (Kim et al., 2018). Research by Kim et al. (2018) suggested a positive association between PBIS with fidelity, which had lower disciplinary exclusions and higher academic achievement. Childs et al. (2016) found that the schoolwide implementation of PBIS with fidelity has a positive effect on student achievement.

Additionally, it was stressed that the fidelity of PBIS should be consistently utilized in each classroom throughout the school (Childs et al., 2016). According to Nocera et al. (2014), all stakeholders need to be included in the process to continue school improvement efforts, which includes students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Teachers and support staff must be continually trained in evidence-based practices to implement PBIS with fidelity. School site data must be utilized to guide decision-making that impacts all learners and staff to continue fidelity

of PBIS. Schools that consistently implemented the PBIS with fidelity were more likely to accomplish favored changes in student behavior, and less exclusionary discipline was used (Pas et al., 2019).

Positive School Climate and Culture

Besides using the PBIS three-tiered system of interventions and the implementation with fidelity, creating a positive school climate is another vital component of PBIS for the reduction of unwanted behavior (Cohen et al., 2009; Cohen & Geier, 2010). According to the National School Climate Center (2020), "School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life; it also reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (para. 3). Concerning terminology, the culture of a school is closely related to school climate. School climate refers to the school's effect on students and their relationships with staff, whereas school culture refers to the way staff works together, as well as their beliefs, values, and assumptions (Cohen & Geier, 2010). Research has shown that school climate and the culture of a school affects both the students' social and emotional development and academic achievement (Acosta et al., 2019; Wang & Degol, 2016; Zullig et al., 2010). How learning is promoted in school is one of the essential functions of a positive school climate (Zullig et al, 2010). The use of the restorative practices in PBIS, such as restorative circles where students can express their emotions to form bonds after problematic behavior, is another essential facet of how school staff and students promote positive school climate (Acosta et al., 2019).

Ahn and Simpson (2013) found that schools create a positive emotional climate for learning by expressing warmth, respect, and interest in each student. Encouragement and cooperation were factors that lead to positive emotional school climates and academic success,

even at alternative schools with students who had experienced exclusionary discipline at prior schools due to behavioral issues. The physical and mental safety protections and precautions also contribute to the school climate. The domain of school safety is typically defined in three dimensions: physical safety, emotional safety, and order and discipline (Wang & Degol, 2016). Physical and emotional safety, along with discipline, are essential for a positive school climate (Ahn & Simpson, 2013). Furthermore, the research shows that public schools that employ punitive discipline structures may inadvertently promote violence and other antisocial behavior, which puts physical and emotional safety at risk (Wang & Degol, 2016). There is no evidence suggesting that suspensions or expulsions lead to positive changes in student behavior or safer schools; nevertheless, these exclusionary discipline methods are still the most utilized for serious misbehavior in school (Nocera et al., 2014).

Not only does school culture matter in PBIS, but also the culture in which the student indigenously derives (Kesler, 2011). Both home and school culture intersect and create school climate (Bal, 2018). Without teachers' and administrators' efforts to engage students in strategic processes to foster interconnected, positive school environments, the inclusion of all students is unobtainable (Hill & Brown, 2013). There is a need for teachers and administrators to utilize the PBIS processes to maintain a positive school climate with respect to diverse cultural backgrounds and provide adequate interventions so that students of all races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds may thrive (Kesler, 2011).

PBIS and Exclusionary Discipline

Several studies show that PBIS implementation with fidelity positively influences student behavior and academic performance and reduces office disciplinary referrals (Hill & Brown, 2013; Hirschfield, 2018; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005). The research conducted

by Hill and Brown (2013) showed that after a 10-week Tier Two PBIS intervention period, students who had been previously at high risk of failure and exclusion received less referrals and made substantial academic progress. Luiselli et al. (2005) also found that lack of preintervention strategies increased office discipline referrals. However, Hirschfield (2018) found that although PBIS has a positive influence on behavior and reduction of office referrals, substantial racial gaps in office disciplinary referrals remained. The research of Jones et al. (2018) showed that Black male students with disabilities accounted for 36% of suspensions among students with disabilities. This data highlighted the implicit bias in exclusionary discipline practices, mainly when a significant portion of the office discipline referrals were the result of subjective interpretation of student behavior. Jones et al. showed that PBIS interventions can highlight the implicit biases inherent within discipline policies because teacher perceptions and interpretations have significant influence upon the disciplinary actions administrators take.

PBIS implementation with fidelity can have a meaningful effect on the reduction of disciplinary incidents. In addition, Gage, Lee, et al. (2018) researched the effects of schoolwide PBIS on suspensions; they found suspensions in schools decreased when PBIS was implemented with fidelity. Results provided evidence that fidelity of implementation of PBIS is a critical component of lessening severe behaviors that result in suspensions and expulsions. In the research from *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: From School Punishment to Rehabilitative Inclusion*, Mallett (2016) found however that suspensions and expulsions are not equitably distributed across student populations; low-income and students of color are highly more prone to receive these discipline outcomes than their peers.

Gordon and Fefer (2019) explained that when examining factors that include student perceptions of school climate include prior school discipline practices, as well as a student's

disciplinary history particularly exclusionary techniques and other punitive discipline practices. Negative outcomes and student perceptions of school climate result from forced disengagement from school when exclusionary discipline such as detention, suspension, and expulsion often occur. Gordon and Fefer (2019) also determined through a School Climate Study that students who reported: "getting into trouble more often had significantly more negative perceptions of school climate" (p.18). Conversely, students who reported positive interactions with their teachers and administrators reported higher levels of positive perceptions towards school climate. The research showed that students who experienced exclusionary disciplinary practices perceived school in a negative light.

Professional development is needed to reduce the discrepancies in exclusionary discipline for certain racial and cultural groups (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Kesler, 2011). Educators need training in areas such as the Culturally Responsive approach to PBIS (Kesler, 2011). Professional development is key to reducing the discrepancies of exclusionary discipline used in schools (Ispa-Landa, 2018). Culturally Responsive practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports utilize restorative justice practices (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Kesler, 2011). According to Kesler (2011), "culturally responsive teaching is based on the premise that students learn best when academic skills and content are situated within the students' frames of reference and lived experiences" (p.419). The research also showed that in order to reach students of diverse cultural backgrounds, educational departments need to train teachers on how to best support all of their students through culturally responsive methods (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Kesler, 2011). Training is particularly essential when educators face unforeseen situations, such as a pandemic (Belsha, 2020).

COVID-19, Virtual Instruction, and Disciplinary Practices

The World Health Organization first announced an official name for a disease that caused the 2019 novel coronavirus on February 11, 2020. This virus was first identified in Wuhan, China; it had not been previously seen in humans. On March 13, 2020, a national emergency was declared in the United States in response to the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 is a virus that causes a range from mild symptoms to those that can lead to severe illness or death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). COVID-19 is a virus that is "spread through respiratory droplets or small particles, such as those in aerosols, produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, sings, talks, or breathes" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Due to the nature of this disease, authorities across the country canceled in-person events of ten or more people to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. Maintaining a distance of at least six feet apart made in-person classroom instruction impossible, so courses were transitioned to virtual online formats (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Virtual Instruction During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The transition to virtual instruction altered the typical in-person learning experiences of students and teachers (Besser, Flett, & Zeigler-Hill, 2020; Lehmann, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020). As of April 2020, over 1.2 billion students worldwide no longer received in-person instruction and participated in virtual online learning environments due to COVID-19 (Li & Lalani, 2020). Li and Lalani (2020) stated that "Research suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information, and take less time, meaning the changes coronavirus have caused might be here to stay" (para. 3). These new virtual class structures that utilize technology for a wide range of engagement tools, such as video lectures that can be reviewed at a later date,

collaboration tools for students to work in groups, and other engaging methods personalize learning (Li & Lalani, 2020). Research has shown that the more students are engaged in their learning, the less problematic behaviors or disciplinary actions arise (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Introverted students thrive and respond well in the virtual learning environments, as these learners prefer quiet learning environments and a lack of pressure to participate (Lehmann, 2020). Students who are able to learn at their own pace, review materials, or accelerate through concepts they may already be familiar with are a contributing factor to higher retention rates in virtual learning (Li & Lalani, 2020). On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has created more stress and health concerns for students due to isolation and loneliness. Increased anxiety and distress have been measured by researchers at heightened levels. Students have been significantly challenged by the added stressor of the pandemic while also attempting to acclimate to new instructional formats (Besser et al., 2020).

Online learning software has allowed students the opportunity to learn asynchronously at all hours of the day, which helps students to create individualized discipline models and learning schedules (Li & Lalani, 2020). Besser et al. (2020) found that some students who participated in synchronous online learning with direct instruction from teachers however may have had negative experiences concerning levels of stress, motivation, and performance compared with traditional face-to-face learning; therefore, the asynchronous environment may be better suited for these learners. Researchers also noted that adaptability was set apart from resilience; adaptability was seen as “coping and thriving in new circumstances,” whereas resilience was the “ability to bounce back from setbacks” (p.16). Students who had personality traits that were deemed as highly adaptable were more likely to view synchronous online learning in a positive light than their peers.

Disciplinary Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the discrepancy in the use of exclusionary discipline has continued to perpetuate inequalities and racial disproportionality in discipline (Belsha, 2020). Discipline problems are much different online than in-person learning; furthermore, students' adaptability and stress levels should be considered (Besser et al., 2020). Students of color or children with learning disabilities may not give the teacher appropriate cues that they are engaged in the lesson and could face disciplinary action (Belsha, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) have published ongoing statistics that exhibit that students of color and teachers have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 through the trauma of contracting the disease at higher rates, the loss of life of family members, and the increased risk factors. Due to the trauma the COVID-19 pandemic has caused, many students struggle emotionally and miss out on instruction, so exclusionary discipline or other harsh consequences will put students further behind academically (Belsha, 2020).

Many in-person class rules and expectations within the virtual school setting only magnify unnecessary and inequitable disciplinary consequences (Washington, 2020). School districts have various consequences for student behavior in online environments and some have created virtual codes of conduct for student behavior that encourage teachers to use exclusionary discipline or remove students who are disruptive from their videoconferencing classroom. According to the codes of conduct in some districts, disruptive students can be placed in alternative online classrooms for minor misbehavior, or they may be suspended outright (Belsha, 2020). Because of this new phenomenon, educators need to offer fair, equitable, and culturally responsive instruction virtually (Washington, 2020; Weaver & Swank, 2020).

Challenges in Virtual Instruction During COVID-19

There are several factors for educators to consider during virtual instruction and discipline; for example, not requiring video feed on Zoom or other video instruction platforms is vital for teachers to reconsider as doing so could further add to their trauma. Allowing students to be recorded on their terms, teachers should also provide alternatives to video feed for participation in live instruction to reduce trauma, such as providing multiple tries or editing (Washington, 2020). *Zoom fatigue* is a new challenge for both learners and teachers (Walker, 2020). According to Walker (2020), there is a "delay that can trigger the brain to look for ways to overcome that lack of synchrony," which then causes anxiety, fatigue, and inability to pick up on subtle cues or micro-expressions (para. 6). Instead of increases of dopamine experienced during face-to-face communication, cortisol levels increase with Zoom meetings, which can trigger the fight or flight response. To combat Zoom fatigue, psychologists recommend that educators and students participate in social-emotional relaxation techniques and exercises. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing interpersonal skills and emotion management to better cope with challenges through self-awareness, problem-solving, responsible decision-making, self-discipline, maintaining positive relationships, and impulse control practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Another issue caused by the lack of in-person instruction is the high number of students not logging in to complete their classwork. According to Cohen (2020), "districts have documented tens of thousands of students who failed to log in or complete their schoolwork" (para.6); for example, approximately 15,000 students have not logged in to district courses since the March shutdown. Students struggling with technology issues are also food insecure and lack permanent housing. Many of the issues that impact public education inequalities are amplified

during the pandemic, which ultimately affects whether a child participates in school or exhibits proper behaviors during instruction (Verges, 2020).

Students' social-emotional needs are important to consider in regard to school discipline, particularly during the pandemic (Washington, 2020). According to Keels (2020), "in these unprecedented times, educators need to strengthen their use of social-emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices" (p.40). The emphasis on punitive discipline will underscore the vulnerability many students are facing and thus increase unwanted behaviors. Trauma-responsible discipline requires that educators understand that many student behaviors are determined by a lack of students' self-regulation capacities; furthermore, educators are often reactive when triggered by student behavior. The purpose of trauma-responsive discipline is to stop educators from being emotionally reactive and move toward becoming "developmentally responsive to the needs of students coping with trauma" (p.41). Utilizing methods that focus on using positive behavioral corrections, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, is more effective because it reinforces the behaviors educators want to see as opposed to focusing on unwanted behaviors (Keels, 2020).

There is not only an emergent health crisis due to COVID-19, but schools are also facing a mental health crisis (Washington, 2020). Proponents of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in conjunction with restorative justice practices, trauma-informed instruction, and social-emotional learning include Keels (2020), who stated,

> Now more than ever, encouraging the use of trauma-responsive discipline with all students could go a long way toward reducing the harm that the racialized application of punitive and exclusionary discipline has on the education and life outcomes of Black and brown children (p.41).

Keels noted that there is a state of urgency regarding students' psychological and emotional needs; nevertheless, many educators have not been provided with appropriate training on how to address these needs. Educators must learn how to respond to student behavior from a lens that can recognize student mental health needs (Washington, 2020). In order for an educator to be trauma-responsive, educators must be proactive and implement positive behavioral corrections and instructional discipline strategies (Keels, 2020).

Next Steps

Moving forward, educators should respond to students with emotional neutrality when dealing with unwanted or challenging student behavior (Keels, 2020). Since the goal is for students to learn in virtual formats, educators need to change instructional strategies and disciplinary mindset (Washington, 2020). According to Washington (2020), "In this moment of crisis, rather than reflexively devolving into punitive tactics, educators can radically shift their mindset on classroom behavior and particularly how they treat marginalized students" (p.1). Controlling student behavior while learning at home should not be the focus, but on instruction and student understanding of the content (Washington, 2020). How teachers interpret student behaviors will vary, as typical interventions or baseline behaviors during a pandemic do not exist in current discipline policies (Belsha, 2020).

Without prior culturally responsive or trauma-informed teacher training, teachers may view students of color as defiant, while their White counterparts are considered in need of social-emotional support (Belsha, 2020). Educators must de-escalate, not intensify the trauma or underlying issues triggering these unwanted behaviors (Washington, 2020). Educators should validate students' emotional experiences and distress while also instructing students on self-regulation, calming techniques and awareness of their emotional state through exploring their

thoughts and feelings and how it affects their physical state, such as heart rate, breathing, tense muscles, etc. In doing so, educators can use empathy to better understand student distress communicated through unwanted behaviors. Overall, educators need to recognize unconscious racial implicit biases to assist students in states of dysregulation (Keels, 2020). "As trauma researchers say, 'Behavior is the language of trauma'"(para. 25), which means that students will show educators through unwanted behaviors that they are experiencing trauma. Therefore, the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Systems techniques in conjunction with the ability to identify and adequately respond to traumatic stress behaviors in students is essential (Keels, 2020).

This literature review addressed the history of school discipline practices, exclusionary discipline, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, implicit biases, and ultimately how disciplinary practices are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of virtual instruction. The body of literature supports the idea that educators and educational leaders should consider prior history and the biases inherent in the exclusionary discipline practices to inform the utilization of the Culturally Responsive practices in the framework of PBIS. This is necessary so as to provide effective alternatives to past discipline practices. Also supported is the need for a shift from the belief that willful defiance is a choice whether or not to follow the rules and that all behaviors should be punished.

Instead, educators must utilize trauma-responsive discipline systems that incorporate PBIS regardless of whether they instruct in-person or in online learning environments to best serve students. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift from in-person to online instructional learning environments, information can be drawn from what was learned during virtual instruction in regard to discipline practices. The following chapter of this study focuses

upon the methodological approach that will be used to gather data from a California middle school that has committed to Culturally Responsive practices and the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports discipline and student behavior management structure during both in-person and virtual instruction.

Conclusion

This chapter was a review of literature encompassing the topic of discipline. The review of literature presented research on the history of discipline, exclusionary disciplinary practices, PBIS, and virtual instruction. The review of literature presented the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed the structure of instruction from in-person to virtual. To investigate the effects of virtual instruction on exclusionary disciplinary practices in California middle schools, the next chapter will discuss the research methodology for this study. The following chapter will also provide an overview of the actionable research and methodology for this study through the semi-structured interview process.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The intent of this chapter is to present the research methodology of this study. In this chapter, a qualitative research methodology is implemented. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. Moreover, the purpose of this study was to determine whether or not, the extent to which, and how Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS procedures implemented by teachers were supportive in a middle school setting. Drawing on qualitative interviews with teachers, the study assessed how practices and procedures have been used in both in-person and virtual classroom settings. This study identified how the virtual learning environment informs future disciplinary practices in middle school. This study allowed for the possibility to impart insightful information and direction for future discipline practices. To arrive at the purpose of the study, the following questions were examined:

1. How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during in-person classroom instruction?
2. How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during virtual classroom instruction?
3. How do teachers understand their experiences in the virtual classroom environment as impacting their instruction, classroom management, or discipline practices when schools return to in-person classroom instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research design used a qualitative study of teachers' insights through semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Mason, 2002). The intent of the interviews was to examine and better understand the practices and approaches to discipline and instruction in the virtual learning environment, as well as allow for identification of unique factors in the virtual environment that may contribute to the development of more effective future discipline and instructional practices that can be applied to in-person instruction. In the following sections of this chapter, the research questions were examined and addressed through the research design, participants of the study, the ethical responsibilities of the researcher, and the study limitations.

Research Design

This study examined teacher use of Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS in the virtual instructional environment and its effect on discipline and instructional practices. Participants were invited to an interview. Theoretical sampling was used in this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Both deductive and inductive approaches in data collection and analysis were utilized (Mason, 2002). Data sources were through a virtual interview that were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative methods were well-matched for this study because this form of inquiry is positioned to understand individualized and contextually sensitive methods and synthesize a more comprehensive understanding (Patton, 2015). Qualitative methods also allow for the personal experience to be analyzed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

An interpretivist approach was used, as it is understood that people and their interpretations, perceptions, and understandings are primary data sources (Mason, 2002). The researcher was a co-investigator with the participants. This approach fits the research questions as it was essential to look at the teachers' understanding of classroom management, lesson planning and instruction, assessments and student success, student engagement and discipline

and compare it with their understanding of Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS, as well as any shifts in teachers' understanding of classroom management during virtual learning. The interpretive approach sought the perceptions or the "insider view" of a primary data source and created collective meanings (Mason, 2002, p. 56).

Participants and Research Site

The study accessed middle schools within a Southern California public K-12 school district. The district could be described as the largest district in its county, as it had over fifty schools in operation. The district also served over 55,000 students. The unduplicated pupil count of free/reduced-price meals, English Language Learners, and Foster Youth was at over 25,000 students. The district was also recently named a California Exemplary School District. According to the Ethnic Diversity Index, the district served a diverse student population with students of color from many different ethnic and racial groups and has a high index score. There were almost 8,000 students classified as English Language Learners in the district. Over 50 languages were represented in the English Learner population. The district had 100% of the teaching faculty labeled as highly qualified, with a majority of teachers who hold at least a master's degree and many hold doctoral degrees (California Department of Education, 2021). In the last recorded year of the CAASPP English Language Arts/Literacy test in 2019, 61.24% of students scored at level or exceeded level results. For the CAASPP Mathematics test in 2019, 46.8% of students scored at level or exceeded level results (EdData, 2021).

The eight participants in this study came from various school sites in the district. Participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality in this study. The sampling was drawn from middle schools across the school district to provide diverse viewpoints and a range of experiences. The sampling strategy was to distribute a survey to all middle school teachers in the

district. Respondents answered questions, such as: total years teaching, years in the district, geographic location of their school, years PBIS trained, and years using Culturally Responsive practices. Teachers were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Participants were chosen from those who indicated willingness to participate in an interview.

Theoretical sampling maximizes the potential to discover as many dimensions and conditions related to the phenomenon as possible. In order to find out teacher viewpoints and understanding, questions regarding their personal experiences during in-person and virtual instruction were asked in the interview process. Borrowing from grounded theory, participant responses were analyzed through coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). From this data coding, analytic results were interpreted (Mason, 2002). The qualitative research gained from the interviews provided data that were analyzed.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Teacher	Total Years Teaching	Years in District	Geographic Location	Years PBIS Trained	Years using Culturally Responsive practices
A	11	5	D	3	11
B	18	15	A	5	15
C	10	7	B	7	4
D	25	17	C	8	17
E	5	4	D	3	5
F	11	6	A	6	11
G	27	22	C	15	18
H	23	20	B	8	15

The participants listed in Table 1 were all middle school teachers who were a part of the district's 2020-2021 Virtual instructional program. This research target population included teachers from each of the different geographical locations within the school district.

Positionality and Role of Researcher

Due to my experience as an educator the past two decades, I might have interacted with a participant at a school site, committee in the district, or through a professional development training. I sought out those who have not previously interacted with me for interviews. In this qualitative study, I was the researcher. As a data-driven educator, I used my ability to decipher meaning and understanding through a phenomenological lens. I attempted to clearly describe the experiences of others without interjecting my own opinions or ideas. This study was developed through an objective intention.

Research Ethics

Ethical standards are the responsibility of the researcher (McMillan, 2012). The researcher ultimately determines whether the research is a success or a failure through adherence to ethical standards. Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2018) explained that researchers are accountable for protecting the privacy of participants. Since I might know participants from working in the district for nearly two decades, I ensured confidentiality through providing pseudonyms for names and not identifying school sites.

According to McMillan (2012), it is essential that "data remains anonymous and/or confidential" (p. 18). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I did not see colleagues daily, nor did I communicate with them often. Moreover, it was rare for me to have conversations with colleagues regarding my research. Our communication was limited to monthly virtual staff meetings through Zoom; there was no opportunity for private conversations as there are with in-person meetings. Therefore, it was quite easy to maintain the credibility and confidentiality of the project.

Instrumentation and Protocols

This study determined how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. This study aimed to determine whether or not Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS procedures implemented by teachers are supportive in a middle school setting. The study assessed how practices and procedures have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings. A focus in the study ascertained the impact the two classroom settings have on student groups who have been historically underserved and/or disproportionately disciplined in the school setting, through inclusion or exclusion from the classroom.

This study also served to determine how instructional practices and procedures that are successful in the virtual school setting can benefit future in-person strategies with a focus on the Culturally Responsive approach to the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports discipline and student behavior management structure through an interview process that seeks to uncover approaches or practices used during the virtual school setting. The purpose of interviews was to question teachers on the topics of classroom management, lesson-planning and instruction, student engagement and discipline during in-person classroom and virtual classroom environments to determine how setting changes may have affected the student groups who have been historically underserved or disproportionately disciplined.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used in this study (Mason, 2002). Participants were asked the same open-ended questions, and depending upon their responses, follow-up questions were added to elicit more detailed participant responses. “This open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the

researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up" (Turner, 2010, p. 756). The interviews were conducted through video conferencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview questions were emailed to the participants a week prior to the video-based interview. The following chart shows the interview questions used and their corresponding research question.

Table 2

Interview Protocol with Research Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
1. How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during in-person classroom instruction?	2. Think back to when we were teaching and learning in person. What influence, if any, did Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS have on your approach to classroom management in the in-person classroom environment? a. How about your approach to lesson planning and instruction (in the in-person classroom environment)? b. How about your approach to assessments and student success (in the in-person classroom environment)? c. How about your approach to student engagement and discipline (in the in-person classroom environment)?
2. How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during virtual classroom instruction?	3. Think about the current teaching and learning virtually. What influence, if any, do Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS have on your approach to classroom management in the virtual classroom environment? a. How about your approach to lesson planning and instruction (in the virtual classroom environment)? b. How about your approach to assessments and student success (in the virtual classroom environment)? c. How about your approach to student engagement and discipline (in the virtual classroom environment)?

3. How do teachers understand their experiences in the virtual classroom environment as impacting their instruction, classroom management, or discipline practices when schools return to in-person classroom instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic?	3. What new classroom management strategies do you use during virtual learning that you did not use in-person? How did these new strategies work for you? Do you have any stories about this that you would like to share? a. What new lesson planning and instructional strategies do you use? b. What new assessment and student success strategies do you use? c. What new student engagement and discipline strategies do you use? 4. What additional supports or training might you want after experiencing the virtual learning environment?

Procedures and Analysis

Data derived through interviews require an ability to provide detailed descriptions and accurate categorization of each experience shared by each participant. In this study, one school district was studied; however, various middle schools were represented. I engaged with each of the participants through a semi-structured interview and compared the data provided from each individual experience to derive commonalities in theme, similar perspectives, differences in perspective, as well as insights into understanding (Mason, 2002). The selection method of these participants was a sampling drawn from middle schools across a school district to provide diverse viewpoints and a range of experiences from different administrator expectations, as theoretical sampling maximizes the potential to discover as many dimensions and conditions related to the phenomenon as possible (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The participants in this study came from various school sites in the district. Participants were provided with pseudonyms for confidentiality in this study (Mason, 2002). The strategy was to select a sample of teachers from each of the different geographical locations in the district to participate in the interviews and surveys.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers who were currently experiencing the phenomenon discussed in the study provided experiential data from which themes were organized by commonalities. These interviews provided in-depth understandings of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the interviews, I located thematic similarities that reflect unique situations but that also had common application. Each of the questions posed in the semi-structured interview directly related to the research questions asked in this study (Mason, 2002).

Limitations

This study holds the possibility to impart insightful information and direction for future discipline practices; however, there were limitations to this study based on factors outside of my control. Limitations beyond the control of the researcher were factored into the study design and results. An issue concerning the scope of the study was the limitation of size. This study considered only middle schools in one Southern California public school district that implements the Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS approach. The information gleaned from this study provides a benefit for all middle schools, as it offered insights and understanding as to what was working in regard to supporting student learning and managing student behaviors. Further research from other geographic locations should be considered to explore the phenomena within many other organizations. Data was only collected from middle school teachers. The decision to narrow the scope of this study was to reduce variables due to grade level or student age and gather data that could be better cross-examined for themes. The experiences in elementary or high school may be different regarding discipline during virtual instruction and should be examined in future research.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the actionable research and methodology for this study through the semi-structured interview process. The data collection steps were defined with purpose. The research design, role of the researcher, participants, instrumentation, and ethical considerations have been detailed to provide a better understanding of this qualitative research study. The following chapters provide an explanation of the findings of this research study, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The previous chapters discussed Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS used by classroom teachers in the California public middle school setting, as well as outlined the methodology of the study. Using a qualitative research design, the methodology includes the positionality and role of the researcher, the data collection methods, research ethics and limitations. In the following chapter, the data derived from the collection methods are summarized and the findings are connected to the Chapter Two literature review. This study considered how the unique online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The purpose of the study was to explore whether or not, how, and to what extent Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS implemented by teachers are supportive in a virtual middle school setting. Findings include a reflection upon practices and procedures that have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings. This study also examined the ways in which instructional practices and procedures that are successful in the virtual school setting may benefit future in-person strategies, particularly with a focus on Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS.

Common Themes

The data aligns with the research discussed in Chapter Two, as well as supports the existing literature on Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The collected data that supports the existing literature is discussed in further detail through themes that emerged during the interview responses. Four themes were identified through the collected data that are common to all teachers serving in each of the geographic locations in this district: student choice, social-emotional learning, technology, and virtual meeting spaces.

Theme One: Student Choice

While asked about the influence that Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS had on teacher instruction, lesson planning, student success, and assessment, each of the participant teachers communicated the concept of student choice. There were different manners in which student choice was provided depending upon the subject matter; however, every participant stated that student choice was an important factor in increases in participation, motivation, and student scores. A few teachers noted that they had never provided students with choices for projects or student work prior to the virtual environment.

Learning Through Projects and Providing Student Choice

Several types of learning through projects were discussed by the participant teachers in the interviews. First, one participant explained the use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in their classroom. This participant, a science teacher, incorporated a form of PBL in their online Google Classroom environment in addition to the computer-based program, and soon saw the students were more apt to complete the projects instead of the computer-based curriculum that involved video lessons, assignments, and quizzes. The students verbalized to the teacher their preference for such projects, so this became the preferred method of instruction and assessment for lessons that addressed more challenging standards.

20% Projects

One teacher implemented a similar project-based approach called the 20% Project. The teacher shared during the interview, “A 20% project is where the students spend 20% of their time pursuing anything that they want to learn.” This teacher explained that these projects had to be related to the content matter, but that they had a choice on what exact subject they wished to explore. Students learned to bake, write code, craft, and build. The participant also explained

that every Friday, the videoconferencing room was left open for students to check-in but much of the time students used to work on their projects. The participant also hosted various workshops throughout the semester. For example, if there were students who wanted to learn how to build a website for their final product for the 20% Project, the teacher would provide a workshop. During the interview, the participant stated that three weeks were spent on instructing video editing using different video editing programs, platforms, or the video editing software embedded in their device. Students had high levels of motivation and their lessons were of high interest.

Student Choice and High-Interest Reduces Discipline Issues

Teachers observed a reduction in disciplinary measures when students were actively engaged in high-interest projects and offered choice for their area of study. In other words, student choice reduced disciplinary issues in the virtual classroom as it did not promote exclusion or punitive practices which is highly ineffective; rather, it allowed students the opportunity to take ownership of their learning (Chan, 2003; Dutton et al., 1995; Gershoff & Font, 2018; Good, 1999; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Weaver & Swank, 2020; Weijers, 2000). One teacher went into detail about this topic:

> I always let students choose the rules. Basically, it's like what is important in a classroom. We established routines, which is really important and gave them a lot of buy-in. It's all about choices and giving them control over their space, but it has to be safe. And, when I'm speaking you have to listen, but let's go for it. Otherwise, I give them a lot of flexibility and choice as a structure, and I found I was a better teacher that way. It's something I pulled into virtual learning. Just give them choice while I also maintain rigor

> and high expectations. I noticed that once I gave students more control over their learning, I had less discipline issues.

Other teachers did not report any discipline issues due to the nature of the virtual classroom.

Another teacher noted that since she incorporated culturally relevant pedagogical lessons into her course at the start of the year, students shared from their family traditions and learned about each other to create a common respect in the classroom. The students choose what they wanted to share about their heritage such as food, dress, celebrations, and holidays. She explained that students gained mutual respect for each other's diverse backgrounds after these cultural lessons. During the virtual instruction, she stated that her students told her that they felt closer to their classmates in her class because of this project. She then explained, "I think because I started the year with this project and I got everyone together on this shared level of respect, I guess I don't have management issues or discipline issues." According to what was shared during the interviews, high-interest lessons with student choice helped the participants in reduction of unwanted behaviors.

Personalization of Curriculum and Assessments

Personalization of work is also an interesting factor discussed by the participant teachers in their interviews. One teacher went into detail about how she learned to personalize curriculum and assessments in her course:

> I've been able to collaborate with the other teachers and plan out lessons that are more culturally relevant to the students. It's something that's exciting for them. It has been something that I've included in my lessons. Recently, students created a cultural collage, and they came up with some really great projects. The students have also had a choice board, so they can choose what theme or kind of project that they wanted to do.

Another participant explained that some students are not as successful with the computer-based program curriculum when it comes to assessments, particularly the quizzes at the end of each lesson. She stated that she has provided students with the option to choose to do a project in place of the quiz. This opportunity is given to students who attend an intervention session with her through a videoconferencing meeting. The student pitches an idea to the teacher on an alternative assignment they would like to complete in place of the quiz. The teacher provides feedback. Students personalize the learning of the content. This participant said that allowing students a choice of how they will be assessed has allowed opportunities for students who were not successful with traditional quizzes, another method to prove they had learned the standards. Furthermore, the student choice strategies discussed in the interviews were used by teachers of all content areas of instruction. This strategy was deemed a highly effective practice in Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, History, and elective classrooms.

Theme Two: Social-Emotional Learning

Participants were asked about the influence that Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS had on classroom management, student engagement, and discipline. Participants stated facets of social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning was used in various practices depending upon the subject matter. Regardless, each participant stated that social-emotional learning was essential toward effective classroom management, student engagement, and discipline. A few participants contended that they had not used social-emotional learning practices prior to the virtual environment, but planned to continue when returning to in-person learning because of the value it brought to their instruction.

Student Check-ins

Student check-ins were explained by every participant as an essential piece of the virtual instruction classroom environment. Most teachers offered one-on-one sessions to students to check in with them daily. Some participants explained that they offered a "drop in" period where students did not need to schedule an appointment for a one-on-one session. Participants discussed that many students, not just those struggling, used these opportunities to meet with the teacher. One participant stated that "one of the biggest problems in virtual is connection and feeling like [students] belong. Giving check-in times with the group or with me helps that." As stated in Chapter Two, these Tier One PBIS interventions, such as student check-ins with their teachers, are prevention for behavior or academic needs daily (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). Another participant went into more detail about the experience:

> I have started using more of social-emotional learning and it is effective. If we're measuring in terms of grades or being able to turn over that leaf for the student, it helps. But what we're talking about is making the student aware that I care. I'm hearing you. I'm listening to you. I give them encouragement. I would say I have had some success. One-on-one check-in meetings in virtual have been very helpful for classroom management and getting students engaged.

Another participant explained that the nature of the virtual classroom helped students to be a bit more anonymous than in the traditional classroom. This allowed for anonymity, but also allowed for deeper discussions and connection with the teacher. The teacher also mentioned that due to the nature of the virtual school platform, teachers did not often discuss prior students, so biases or preconceived notions were not possible. Also, when students turned off their cameras,

teachers could not see their appearance, so implicit biases may not have become an issue. The participant discussed this at length:

> So as far as being culturally responsive and thinking about PBIS, I do think that it had a great influence on me and how I responded to, interacted with, and even taught some students in the past. I could teach on a deeper level or go quicker with some. And other classes, I really needed to stop and make connections with the past. I needed to review more. I am one of those people who really embraces the idea that student success is a two parter. First, there has to be some internal motivation with the student, and I can only for so much. I'm limited in my power, unfortunately. Then the other part is me taking full responsibility and making sure that I have provided every opportunity for that student to master that content, meaning that I have to first understand where you're at. I would be very intentional with who I'm spending my time in the classroom. That's because I know some got it and some need additional practice. But with virtual, I can't make these assumptions that everybody's at home and studying, or that you had your lights on, you had pencils and paper, you had a parent or sibling you could go ask for additional support, or even that you know it's your responsibility to ask when you're not understanding something, or even though you realize that you are the one who needs to approach me. That, I don't automatically know. As teachers, we didn't have previous knowledge of the students. We also didn't know what other teachers thought of them. I didn't have teachers telling me, "Oh, that Johnny". I had to ask questions and try to understand where they were. I had to show them compassion. I talked about procrastination and motivation with students. Some told me they were depressed. You don't even realize this depression during in-person. 95% still didn't turn on their camera,

> but at least I now had information from when we had dialogue. I showed my face and I tried to make my face look concerned and I'm looking in the camera and I'm paying attention to you and I'm asking you questions just about you. So, I think that ultimately made a world of difference for a few students. We got to understanding each other a bit more and I just started saying things like, "I will reduce this workload" or "ok let's start where you're at". I whittled down some of the work but asked students to do their best work for 10-minute chunks. I would meet with the student the next week and then raise it to 20-minute chunks. I would ask, how did it feel? They would tell me. I would say, now you can do 20 minutes at a time and would help them turn over that leaf.

This finding supports the research by Ispa-Landa (2018) which explored the idea of the effects of implicit biases on student behavior. As students were able to maintain anonymity at times, this provided "social-psychological interventions" (Ispa-Landa, 2018). Many of the students were able to confide in their teacher about depression or lack of motivation and did so with their cameras turned off, which this participant stated these types of conversations did not occur during in-person instruction. She also mentioned that she did not have prior knowledge of students from other teachers and was able to connect deeply with students during one-on-one check-ins.

One participant also noted that being able to have one-on-one time made the virtual school experience much more engaging and allowed the teacher time to get to know students better because in-person instruction did not allow for as much time to talk one-on-one with a student. These opportunities allowed the teacher to make decisions for intervention or personalization of curriculum and a better understanding of how a particular student may be challenged or needing additional support. Tier One interventions such as these are proactive

practices that help students connect to the school and reduce unwanted behavior (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). Several teachers also intimated that they were able to have better conversations with students than during in-person instruction because there was more time available. Teachers were not asking a student to stay after class between the bell or to come after school or during lunch. Teachers were able to dedicate ten to twenty minutes to have in-depth conversations about progress, struggles with curriculum, or mental health issues.

Mindfulness

Many of the participants considered the use of mindfulness and breathing exercises during their videoconferencing or through providing students with daily videos and guided mindfulness exercises for students to view each day. One participant stated that she dedicated one day a week to mindfulness called, "Take Care of Yourself Tuesdays." She stated that each week on this day in particular her attendance for her videoconferencing meetings was much higher than on other days. She even explained that students have requested more resources on mindfulness on the other days she did not do these exercises during videoconferencing.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, psychologists have recommended that educators and students participate in social-emotional relaxation techniques and exercises (Walker, 2020). Another more experienced teacher stated that he wished he had known about mindfulness earlier in his career. He considered that it has helped reduce discipline issues and helps to keep students on task. One of the more experienced participants also shared this:

> Technology, because you know, that's not going to go away, it's only going to get better and better. What is important with that in mind is mindfulness. We need more mindfulness and incorporating more of the breathing techniques into the classroom.

More Empathy Towards Struggling Students

Another factor that researchers have shown as highly effective for students' behavioral change was "increasing teachers' empathy for students may be a reasonable way to reduce implicit racial bias" (Ispa-Landa, 2018, p.386). During the interviews, participants noted that the virtual platform provided them "a better glimpse into students' home lives", which in turn created more empathy towards students who were struggling. One participant explained that one of her middle school students was the oldest child in their family and had to watch a 2-year-old sibling while completing their lessons. The same child also had to keep his two other elementary aged siblings on task in their own virtual learning. This reality was not apparent to the teacher prior to the virtual learning experience. The same teacher shared that they had gained more empathy towards students who may not complete homework during in-person instruction because they had no idea how chaotic a home environment may be for the student.

This was just one of several teachers who stated this type of interaction with students. The teachers discussed that in the future a reduction of homework or no daily homework might be something to be considered. One teacher also communicated that they would use more project-based learning and allow students time in class to complete what is necessary as they may not have the tools or space available at home.

Theme Three: Technology

When asked about the influence that Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS had on lesson planning, instruction, and student engagement the participant teachers all discussed the use of technology. There were different methods in which use of technology were provided depending upon the subject matter; nevertheless, each participant stated that the use of technology was an important consideration with higher interest lessons, student engagement, and

discipline. Participant teachers noted that they had not implemented many practices prior to the virtual environment because it required each student to have a personal device.

The virtual environment also provided numerous opportunities for the participant teachers regarding instruction and lesson implementation. Furthermore, teachers were innovative and more open-minded to trying new approaches during the virtual learning environment. The online learning experience created opportunities for increased risk-taking and innovation. Teachers engaged in more online professional development and social media support groups. Teachers became risk-takers with new technologies and programs. Many participants mentioned that they hoped to continue this approach to their instruction because they felt they became better teachers in this short amount of time

One-to-one devices became essential in the virtual learning environment; moreover, several teachers voiced the importance of providing each student with a device moving forward when returning to in-person instruction so that the practices they learned during the virtual environment could be continued. The only limitation mentioned by teachers was the infrequent technology issues, such as power outages, connectivity issues, or program errors. These issues were said to not be major limitations and only an annoyance sporadically.

Teacher Recorded Lessons

One such practice that many participant teachers described during the interview was that they can record an exemplar lesson of instruction which benefits students in many ways. First, students all receive the same high level of instruction. Additionally, the teacher is free to pause and clarify questions as they arise. Students who are absent are still able to receive a high level of instruction. These recorded lessons also served as a supplement for when the teacher is absent, and a substitute is in their place. The teacher can pre-record their lesson and provide

high-quality instruction for all students instead of relying upon the ability of the substitute to interpret their lesson plans. Many participants described using different recording programs that either video or audio recorded their instruction to go along with digital presentations and curriculum.

Assessment Games and Collaboration

In addition to recorded instruction, participant teachers discussed the use of several different programs and websites that allowed for assessment through games. Informal assessment pieces using technology were discussed by several teachers during the interview. Collaborative online computer programs that involved all students or small groups were suggested as highly motivating for student participation. According to prior research, students who reported positive interactions with their teachers and administrators reported higher levels of positive perceptions towards their learning (Gordon & Fefer, 2019). These games allowed students to collaborate and participate in informal assessment during the lesson. Participants described lessons in which students could work in teams or individually to provide answers to questions posed by the teacher. One teacher explained that students looked forward to the days they provided these games and students would often request the games by name.

Technology With Student Collaboration

Participants also declared during their interviews the importance of collaboration in the virtual environment. This allowed students to feel more connected even when working from home. Students were able to work on shared presentations, documents, files, and projects through the use of technology and personal devices. Participants also suggested that students could meet synchronously or asynchronously to complete their assignments and collaborate. Participants stated that the ability for students to collaborate on their own time provided better

work products than when students were given similar projects to complete in person. According to participants, their students were more actively engaged in their learning, and experienced reduced discipline issues than when students collaborated in person. As stated in Chapter Two, the manner in which learning is promoted in school is one of the essential functions of a positive school climate (Zullig et al., 2010). Positive school climate and the culture of a school affects both the students' social and emotional development and academic achievement (Acosta et al., 2019; Wang & Degol, 2016; Zullig et al., 2010).

Theme Four: Virtual Meeting Spaces

When asked about the influence that Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS had on classroom management, lesson planning, instruction, assessment, student success, student engagement, and discipline the participants all discussed the use of virtual meeting spaces. Numerous programs and applications for virtual meeting spaces were implemented depending upon the subject matter and teacher preference; regardless, each participant stated that the use of virtual meeting space was essential to all areas including: classroom management, lesson planning, instruction, assessment, student success, student engagement, and discipline. Participant teachers also stated that they had not used the virtual meeting spaces prior to the virtual classroom environment, and many did not know of their existence until the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual classroom environment necessitated these virtual meeting spaces, but the participant teachers also stated that these programs and applications should be continued in the future for various reasons.

Videotelephony Meetings With Parents

One of the areas of virtual meeting spaces that was specified by all participants was the videotelephony meetings with parents. Videotelephony meetings are technology applications

which involve devices, such as computers, smartphones, or televisions, and allow for two or more people to participate in a real time conversation from different physical locations. Since the videotelephony meetings do not require attendees to be in the same physical location, it allowed for better parental involvement and attendance in meetings with teachers and administration of the school. Participants discussed that many parents were grateful for the option to attend meetings through remote applications, as they had busy work schedules or may be travelling in areas that were not in close proximity to the school.

The ability for videotelephony meetings were also referred to by participants as a great method to meet informally and more frequently with particular students who needed more assistance or support. Similar to the student check-ins, these meetings with parents were conducted by some participants with parents on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to ensure that all stakeholders were in agreement.

Distance Education Through Videoconferencing With Students

Like the videotelephony meetings with parents, distance education through videoconferencing with students was discussed by all participants. This method of instruction was new to all the participants in this study. Many discussed their enjoyment of the platform, as one participant stated, it allowed for "a lot of flexibility and more in-depth instruction." Participants also explained that specific controls, such as mute buttons or waiting rooms, helped to reduce classroom distractions and disciplinary issues. Most of the participants were quite positive about their experiences with videoconferencing with students. However, one of the participants expressed their thoughts about classroom management and discipline in this way: "I don't really have discipline problems. But I want to be honest because it's all on Zoom, so I don't get to see them not doing their work."

Pre-recorded Videos for Students and Parents

According to many of the participants, pre-recorded presentations and informative lessons through video caused less issues and provided more clarity. For example, one teacher stated that she received a lot of positive feedback from parents on her "Back to School Night" video that she posted to her online classroom. Many parents explained that they typically work during the time schools implement the traditional "Back to School Night" and they would often miss out on the information that is shared at those meetings. Parents had shared with participants that they hope these videos continue in the future for them to be able to view on their own time and not feel left out because they could not attend in-person meetings. According to prior research, schools with increased parent involvement were more likely to achieve favored changes in student behavior (Nocera et al., 2014).

Other participants revealed that the students provided positive feedback for instructional videos that teachers had prepared on specific lessons or topics. Many students said they preferred the videos because, unlike in the traditional classroom, they could pause, rewind, and replay parts of the lesson they may need additional support or did not understand the first time it was stated. Also, participants shared that students enjoyed the pre-recorded video lessons or instructional videos because they could review them at any time if they needed to prepare for a quiz or needed a refresher on the information. These PBIS structures can be easily shared with students, which when shared through established routine and modeling reduces behavioral issues (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018).

Videoconferencing and Webinars for Professional Development

Participants all spoke of the use of videoconferencing and webinars for professional development. Many stated that these platforms allowed them to learn more about methodologies

that support Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS at a higher pace due to the convenience and availability. Participants from most geographic areas, except the one closest to the district office, stated that traffic and time were the biggest factors in why they do not attend many professional development opportunities. Several participants revealed that they hoped that these professional development videoconferences and webinars continued in the future, as they allowed them to learn from home or their own classroom.

Online Chat Feature for Private Conversations With the Teacher

Another feature of videoconferencing with students is the "chat" feature. This feature allows students to type out questions and send them either to all attendees in the meeting or directly to the teacher. One participant discussed that his students preferred to type out their questions and that during days where he is checking in with students on the videoconferencing platform, they often will log in just to type a question and wait for a response. The participant stated that he sometimes will respond verbally, and other times will respond in writing. He mentioned the following:

> A classroom management strategy I used in virtual that I haven't in person is using the chat, like the chat in Zoom. That was something that blew my mind that kids could still communicate without calling attention to themselves. They really prefer when I leave it private, so that that way they don't have to worry about anybody else seeing their thoughts.

Other participants revealed that it is a great feature to have so that students with anxiety, learning disabilities, or just those who may be shy to ask a specific question, could ask without feeling "on the spot." This tool allowed all students to participate, collaborate, or reach out for clarification on instruction, as well as reduce unwanted behaviors during instruction or

disciplinary issues. The online private chat feature with the teacher supports the idea that creating a positive school climate is an essential component in the reduction of unwanted behavior (Cohen et al., 2009; Cohen & Geier, 2010).

Paradox of Virtual Meeting Spaces

An unexpected theme emerged while conducting the participant interviews. It was communicated by several participants that they always want to know more about their students on a personal level, yet due to the hectic bell schedule and larger class sizes this is not always possible. Surprisingly, technology and the virtual meeting space environment has enabled this personal connection to happen with a larger number of students in a short amount of time.

Teachers felt that they had more time for one-on-one check in meetings. The meetings in the virtual space created the paradox of when distance brings everyone closer. The student and teachers may have been physically distanced, but they had the opportunity for closer relationships. This was due in part to the ability for teachers to allow most students time to complete their projects, watch videos, or complete work while the teacher met one-on-one with students through videoconferencing platforms. This unexpected theme that emerged from the data paradoxically exhibited the phenomenon that technology and the virtual environment had enabled deeper personal connection to occur between teachers and students.

Absenteeism

The only negative feedback shared by participants during the interviews was the ability for students to retreat from participation in class. According to the participants, most students participated in their virtual meeting spaces and lessons; however, there was a small group of students with high rates of absenteeism. These students may not have logged into the LMS or videoconferencing classes at all during the school year. One participant stated that he believed

that these are the same group of students who attend in-person class but never submit coursework. The participant shared that he emailed and called parents without any success, as well as reached out to the administration of the school to contact parents. Regardless of how many times contact was made, the student did not attend virtual lessons or complete any coursework. This setback to the virtual learning environment was mentioned by all participants.

Conclusion

Four themes were identified from the data that consistently stated in all the middle school teacher interviews regardless of geographic location or years of experience with Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. Themes identified through the data are student choice, social-emotional learning, technology, and virtual meeting spaces. Student choice examined the use of options in lessons, projects, and other learning methodologies during virtual instruction. Social-emotional learning examined various practices that teachers used during virtual instruction that assisted students in managing emotions and working on interpersonal skills. Technology discussed the computer modalities and programs used during virtual instruction. Virtual meeting spaces considered the use of videoconferencing and the various features within these programs. Additionally, an unexpected theme emerged from the data: the paradox of when distance brings people closer. Teachers discussed that they may have been physically distanced from their students, but they felt that the nature of the virtual instructional environment enabled them to have more one-on-one time with students which built closer relationships. In Chapter Four, the study findings provided a narrative of the participants and an overview of the themes that emerged from the data. In the next chapter, recommendations and further interpretations of the study are explained.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As written in Chapter One, this qualitative study sought to understand how the virtual learning environment has had an effect on middle school classrooms. In Chapter Two, extensive research through a review of literature explored the topics of discipline, intervention systems and frameworks, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences upon instruction and discipline. The highly effective intervention systems and frameworks of Culturally Responsive practices and the Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) were also discussed in detail in Chapter Two. The ideas discussed regarding discipline, structures, and practices, which served to outline the direction for this study.

Chapter Three presented the research methodology of this study, which was a qualitative research methodology with the purpose of investigating how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The study findings provided a narrative of the participants and an overview of the themes that emerged from the data in Chapter Four. The study also reflected on how practices and procedures have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings by participants.

In this chapter, further interpretations of the data and recommendations from this study are described. This qualitative study sought to understand how the virtual learning environment has had an effect on middle school classroom teachers' use of Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. Several long-term solutions and insights will be presented that may have potential application and impact to learning from Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS during the virtual environment. The recommendations of this study may help middle school teachers implement new practices or reevaluate current practices about classroom management, lesson

planning, instruction, assessment, student engagement, and discipline, which ultimately will provide a positive impact on student achievement as shown through extensive research (Childs et al., 2016; Kesler, 2011; Kim et al., 2018; Nocera et al., 2014; Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Pas et al., 2019). From an instructional perspective, this study could also provide both information and guidance for decision-makers when considering best practices for future professional development.

Research Question Discussion

All research questions are outlined below with a summary of the study findings.

Research Question One

How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during in-person classroom instruction?

Upon reflection of the data, the interview data revealed that most of the participants trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS implemented numerous procedures and modeled practices for students while in-person. Participants explained the use of behavioral flow charts, collaborative classroom procedures and rules, as well as daily routines. Participants also discussed that they had believed they had a clear understanding of students' emotions as they participated in their classroom instruction in person. Participants also noted that they were able to do more informal assessments with students as needed or have students work in small groups.

Research Question Two

How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during virtual classroom instruction?

When reviewing the interview data, it uncovered that many of the participants trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS continued to implement procedures and modeled practices for students during virtual instruction. These procedures were more detailed and descriptive through means of written documents, digital slideshows, or audio accompanied presentations instead of only verbally while in-person. Many participants noted during the interviews that they felt students had a clearer understanding of procedures and expected practices because of the detailed written directives and presentations.

Participants also noted that there was a need for more modeling, explanation of rubrics, or providing exemplars of expected student work while in the virtual learning environment. In turn, increased modeling, explanation of rubrics, and exemplars of expected student work improved the quality of student work teachers received. Participants further described that they had believed they understood students' emotions as they entered their classrooms, but that the virtual environment allowed them to hold more one-on-one meetings with students through videoconferencing and made deeper connections and had a more in-depth understanding of student emotional wellbeing. On a similar note, participants also specified during the interviews that technology and the programs available to students through their devices allowed for daily informal assessment to occur during lessons at a much more rapid pace and could be embedded into the daily instruction through technology and applications that paired with presentations, such as PearDeck, Kahoot, Google Drive, and Padlet.

Research Question Three

How do teachers understand their experiences in the virtual classroom environment as impacting their instruction, classroom management, or discipline practices when schools return to in-person classroom instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic?

When analyzing the interview data, it revealed that participants had learned new classroom management skills, instructional tools, assessment practices, student engagement, and discipline practices during virtual instruction. As discussed in the prior research question, teachers provided more detailed and descriptive procedures through means of digital forms (written documents, slideshows, or audio accompanied presentations) in place of in-person verbal instructions.

During the interviews, participants explained that they felt that students had a more defined understanding of procedures and expected practices because of the increased amount of detailed written directives and well-defined directions in their presentations. Participants also declared that this is a practice they wish to continue when they return to in-person instruction as these practices were perceived, as one teacher put it, "highly effective over just providing verbal instructions or instructions on the board". Similarly, participants also observed the requirement for more detailed modeling of the lessons, further explanations or more detailed rubrics, or a need to give students exemplars of expected work while in the virtual learning environment. Through the increased modeling, explanation of rubrics, and exemplars of expected student work, the participants remarked that the quality of student work submitted had increased.

Participants elucidated their previous ideas about social-emotional learning. Many participants voiced that previously they believed they grasped students' emotions as they entered their classrooms, but that the virtual environment provided them with the opportunity to have more one-on-one meetings with students through videoconferencing. These one-on-one meetings allowed for the opportunity for teachers and students to develop deeper connections and provide teachers with a more in-depth understanding of the students' actual emotional wellbeing. Participants stated that they had a more comprehensible understanding of social-

emotional learning and practices to support students' mental health as many made this a priority in their instructional practices during the virtual school day. Several participants stated during the interviews that they will incorporate social emotional learning practices in their in-person instruction when they return as they see these practices as "highly valuable". Some of the practices discussed that will be implemented are mindfulness, student check-in meetings, breathing exercises, and slides added to presentations at the beginning of lessons which ask students to reflect on their current emotional states.

It is important to note that there was a lot more risk-taking by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one participant stated that they felt more inclined to "try new things without being afraid to fail." Participants also mentioned that they were highly motivated to attend more professional development opportunities, particularly in regard to technology implementation in their instruction. Additionally, several teachers discussed that they reached out to other teachers through various social media platforms. These groups consisted of teachers in the district, as well as teachers across the United States. It was shared that several social media groups were created to support teachers through the virtual instruction experience. One participant shared that these groups were a "lifeline" during the virtual learning environment.

During the interviews, participants also determined that technology and the programs available to students through their devices allowed for daily informal assessment to occur during lessons at a much more rapid pace. Participants asserted that instructional programs could be embedded into the daily instruction through technology and applications that paired with presentations. Each teacher had a recommendation for different sorts of computer applications that could best serve their particular subject matter; however, the ability for these choices did not

exist prior to the pandemic as this district was not previously a one-to-one computer device district. Because the district has made it clear that the intention is to provide one-to-one computer devices for all students, all the participants in the interview process enthusiastically asserted their intentions to add many different learning applications and presentations into their daily lesson planning, instruction, assessment, and classroom management strategies.

Research Questions Discussion Summary

Chapter One set the intention to gain knowledge in the areas of discipline, classroom practices, Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. In Chapter Two, what other researchers had learned regarding Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS was discussed in detail. Because this study set out to discover how teachers who were trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS experienced the virtual classroom environment, I learned that this novel experience provided teachers with countless experiences to inform their future practices.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations for future practices that would support student success. These practices are organized thematically into three groups: lesson planning and instructional practices, social-emotional learning practices, and videoconferencing and digital recordings.

Lesson Planning and Instructional Practices

Based on the research and findings in Chapter Four, I am endorsing the following practices: student choice, increased use of Learning Management Systems, programs, and personal devices, the reduction of homework, high interest direct instruction utilizing technology, increased professional development in technology and instruction, and the option for students to

continue virtual learning as an alternative to in person school. There were many practices discussed by participants during the interviews that dealt with lesson planning and instruction.

As indicated by the participants during the interviews, one important practice was student choice. Teachers discussed the idea that student choice is essential to higher interest lessons. It is also suggested that students be given the opportunity to collaboratively create classroom rules. Participants stated that student choice could include providing multiple options for student projects or work. Student choice could also mean offering a choice board or the ability to pitch an idea to the teacher to show their learning or mastery of a topic. Project-based learning and 20% Projects have been used by teachers during the virtual environment and can be continued when returning to in-person learning.

It is recommended that teachers look at their current lessons and assessments and provide more opportunities for student choice. Another perceived benefit of student choice is the reduction of student discipline incidents. Participants stated that when students were provided choice, the time spent on student discipline decreased. From this experience with student choice, students had more time spent learning and had increased time on task. I also propose that districts provide teachers with professional development training on how to incorporate student choice into their daily instruction and lesson plans, as well as provide teachers with collaborative planning time on how to implement these choices.

During the virtual learning environment, many participants had postulated that they were able to get a better understanding of students' home life situations. Participants in the interviews for this study decidedly stated the need for their reevaluation of workload when they return to in-person instruction. A reduction of homework or no daily homework is a suggestion for teachers to consider in the return to in-person instruction. Teachers may also want to reconsider using

lesson plans that move at too quickly a pace or require students to do much of the learning at home where the teacher is not present to support learning.

Similarly, to best support all learners, it is recommended that school districts eliminate their homework policies or reconsider their approach to homework. Another suggestion is to provide students with more project-based learning instead of homework and allow students time in class to complete what is necessary as they may not have the tools or space available at home. Additionally, it is recommended to provide students with project-based learning, 20% Projects, flipped classroom or other effective student project practices that enable more student choice in their learning, as well as continue to practice risk-taking by continuing to use novel technologies and continue to learn and implement new instructional skills. I also advocate for professional development for teachers to use these project-based learning approaches and integration of student choice in lessons be provided by school districts.

Teacher involvement in direct instruction is important. Another recommendation regarding instructional practice is an increased use of technology during lessons, such as allowing students to create presentations or videos instead of spotlighting students for oral presentations in the front of a classroom. Many participants remarked that allowing students to curate a video presentation took some of the anxiety of public speaking away from the assignment, which in turn allowed students to provide quality work products. Participants shared that some students struggled to participate in front of the class or struggled because they were introverted; however, they thrived using the video presentations. According to the interviewed teachers, the use of technology to aid in learning may help to assist differently abled learners perform at the same level as their peers. It is important that districts commit to continuing to

provide technology in classrooms, as well as to individual teachers and students, to best support all learners.

Based on the findings in Chapter Four, I endorse the increased use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) during the return to in-person instruction, so that parents can log in to digital classrooms and keep better track of where students are in their learning. It is also highly recommended that the school district use one LMS per grade level, as inconsistent use by individual teachers is confusing and frustrating for students and parents. Teachers should post all projects, assignments, rubrics, and other class work on the LMS each week. It is also recommended that there is a shift toward providing most work in digital form, so that parents can view the student's work being produced in class. The option for students to choose a virtual learning option instead of in-person learning is important. It is recommended that the school district continue to provide a virtual learning option for middle school students.

Another recommendation based on the findings in Chapter Four is to provide more student work exemplars and clearly defined rubrics for assignments so that students can self-assess prior to submitting work. Because participants observed the need for more modeling, explanation of rubrics, or providing exemplars of expected student work while in the virtual learning environment, the quality of student work they received had improved in comparison to their prior in-person lessons. Teachers can continue this practice of more detailed modeling of expectations, more thorough explanation of rubrics, and providing exemplars of expected student work. It is also recommended that collaborative planning to create these lessons be provided by the district.

Social-Emotional Learning Practices

Based on the research and findings in Chapter Four, I am proposing the following practices: frequent student check-ins, mindfulness or emotion regulation practices, and professional development on adolescent development. One of the statements that the participants all revealed during their interviews was the importance of social-emotional learning. Each of these participants implemented different forms; however, connection with students was a recurring theme. One recommendation from this data is to create more frequent one-on-one student check-ins with teachers; this can be done weekly or biweekly while other students are working on projects, or administrators can provide time within the school hours for teachers to complete these types of check-ins with students. This advisement goes hand and hand with the project-based learning and 20% project recommendations, as that format allows teachers more time and flexibility during class time. Teachers can meet with students during class while the other students are busy working on their project-based learning or 20% projects.

Another important social-emotional learning technique is the use of mindfulness practices and other emotion regulation practices. After the virtual instructional environment, participants learned the value of these practices and shared during the interview how they improved their relationships with students. These practices also were said to have reduced disciplinary issues and helped students to manage their emotions during times of high stress. Participants also mentioned that it helped students with concentration on difficult tasks or prior to a test. It is recommended that teachers use these practices at various times. It is recommended that schools provide time within the daily schedule for these practices.

Regarding social-emotional learning, one important proposal is to provide teachers with additional training and professional development, as well as collaborative time to develop lesson

plans with colleagues. One area of needed training is on how the middle school adolescent brain works. Providing training with a specialist who works with adolescent child development would allow teachers to have a better understanding of what should be expected of students at this age. Similarly, districts should provide professional development on middle school child development from a researcher at university. The virtual learning environments unmasked the excessively high expectations some teachers have of student abilities for this age group.

Participants in this study mentioned that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic teachers had focused more on academics than on the social-emotional needs of their students. I suggest that school districts place Maslow's (2018) Hierarchy of Needs before Bloom's (1970) Taxonomy. One of the most important recommendations from this study is for districts to move away from a focus on rigor to a more supportive support system for students during their educational experiences. This supportive system would include proper teacher training on all the areas mentioned above, as well as how to spot a child who may need more mental health assistance. Similarly, another area of professional development or training could be to provide teachers more training on trauma-informed instruction. Teachers who are knowledgeable about Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS noted that they need more instruction about how to work with students who have experienced trauma.

Videoconferencing and Digital Recordings

Based on the research and findings in Chapter Four, I am endorsing the following practices: continue the use of videoconferencing in the schools, create a library of instructional videos for each teacher or course, and provide videos in lieu of attendance at parent informational meetings. During the interviews, there were many practices discussed by participants that had to do with lesson planning and instruction. For example, one such practice

was the increased use of videoconferencing as a tool in schools. Continuing to utilize this form of communication is highly recommended when schools return to full in-person instruction.

There are many situations in which videoconferencing can be helpful. For example, videoconferencing may be helpful for parent meetings, as well as for professional development training. Using videoconferencing for parent meetings to allow better flexibility for those with difficult schedules. This would be a great tool for IEP, SST, SARB, progress meetings, etc. The use of videoconferencing and webinars for Professional Development days is another recommendation. This would allow a larger number of teachers and staff to participate without the need for large facilities or meeting rooms. It is highly recommended that school districts commit to funding these forms of digital communication applications.

Another important advisement is for teachers and administrators to have a library of helpful videos available for students and parents. Instead of in-person Back-to-School Night, in which many parents are unable to attend due to busy work schedules, another helpful suggestion is for teachers to record their welcome messages and post videos for parents to better understand how their classroom is run. Pre-recorded videos and lessons for students caused less issues and provided more clarity. Another advisement is for teachers to video record presentations for lessons that may be more difficult for students to understand in one sitting. This could also be helpful for students who were absent from a lesson or to help students with special needs. Teachers could record valuable lessons using recording programs, so that students have access to lessons asynchronously at times convenient for them. Asynchronous learning is a positive experience for most students.

Future Research Opportunities

When considering future opportunities for research related to this study, there are three recommendations. First, teachers from all levels could participate in a similar study to define and examine practices, programs, technologies, or other supports teachers at other levels determined to be helpful when instructing their particular age groups. Second, longitudinal studies of students who remain in the virtual learning environment could be conducted to determine instructional practices or management that may be successfully applied to all instructional environments. Lastly, a larger study encompassing multiple school districts with a larger participant number might be helpful in identifying additional practices that were established as beneficial in the virtual learning environment.

Conclusion

Chapter One set the intention of this qualitative study to understand how the virtual learning environment has had an effect on middle school classrooms, specifically how the Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS contributed to classroom management, lesson planning, instruction, assessment, student engagement, and discipline. In Chapter Two, a review of literature was conducted on the topics of discipline, intervention systems and frameworks, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences upon instruction and discipline (Acosta et al., 2019; Belsha, 2020; Childs et al., 2016; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Cohen et al., 2009; Curran, 2016; Gage, Lee, Grasley-Boy, & Peshak George, 2018; Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018; Gershoff et al., 2018; Gordon & Fefer, 2019; Hirschfield, 2018; Keels, 2020; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009; Washington, 2020). The literature review explored the research on discipline, structures, and practices that served as a framework for the next steps in this study. Chapter Three presented the qualitative research methodology of this study with the purpose of investigating

how the novel online learning environments in middle school have affected the planning, instruction, and discipline approaches of teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The study findings discussed in Chapter Four provided a narrative of the participants and an overview of the themes that emerged from the data. The study also reflected on how practices and procedures have been used in both the in-person and virtual classroom settings by participants.

Interpretations of the data and recommendations from this study were described in this chapter. Because this study set out to discover how teachers who were trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS experienced the virtual classroom environment, I learned that having a more student-centered approach is what participants discovered was of value to them during the virtual instructional environment. This meant that student choice, social-emotional learning, technological tools, and virtual meeting spaces all served to support the individual student and the teacher. Many of these practices learned during the virtual learning environment can be applied to future practices, as well as used in the traditional in-person learning environment.

Several long-term solutions and insights were presented in this chapter that have the capacity to impact future instructional methods and applications about Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS. The recommendations of this study may assist other middle school teachers, support staff, and administrators implement new systems or reevaluate current practices regarding classroom management, lesson planning, instruction, assessment, student engagement, and discipline, which may provide an impact on student achievement as shown through extensive research (Childs et al., 2016; Kesler, 2011; Kim et al., 2018; Nocera et al., 2014; Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Pas et al., 2019). This study may also provide guidance for decision-makers when

considering best practices for future professional development and technology pieces. Overall, this study provided numerous instructional pieces, methods, and recommendations for future practices.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

Concordia
UNIVERSITY·SAINT PAUL

TO: hawkeyk@csp.edu
CC: Humans Subjects Review Committee File

The IRB Human Subjects Committee reviewed the referenced study under the exempt procedures according to federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.104d (2): RESEARCH THAT ONLY INCLUDES INTERACTIONS INVOLVING EDUCATIONAL TESTS (COGNITIVE, DIAGNOSTIC, APTITUDE, ACHIEVEMENT), SURVEY PROCEDURES, INTERVIEW PROCEDURES, OR OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR (INCLUDING VISUAL OR AUDITORY RECORDING).

Study Number: 2021_23
Principal Investigator: Kari Hawkey
Title: A Study of the Impact of Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in the Virtual Middle School Setting

Classification: __**X**__ Exempt ___Expedited ___ Full Review

Approved __**X**__

Approved with modifications: ____ [See attached]

Declined ____ [See attached]

Upon receipt of this letter, you may begin your research. Please remember that any changes in your protocol need to be approved through the IRB Committee. When projects are terminated or completed, the IRB Committee should be informed in order to comply with Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Regulations, Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations Part 46 (45 CFR 46). If you have questions, please call the IRB Chair at (651) 641-8723.

Stephen D. Ross
Signature, Chair Human Subjects Review Committee

March 24, 2021
Date

Appendix B: Letter of Introduction to District Leader

Greetings,

You are receiving this letter to ask permission to include your school district in a study related to instruction and discipline in virtual school. The purpose of the study is to understand how Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS training are applied in planning, instruction, and discipline approaches in the virtual learning platforms. The results of the study will be presented in a dissertation. Specifically, I will ask study participants questions related to their experiences within the virtual and in-person classroom environments.

There are no anticipated risks to participating in this research study. This research project aims to inform future discipline processes, instructional environments, and professional development needs for teachers. Your school district's identity will be protected via the use of a coded pseudonym in documents relating to the study and the paper presenting the results of the study. Information from this study may benefit others now and in the future, as the results of this research may help decision-makers and professionals gain insights into how novel practices could contribute to improved student outcomes.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss the research study and the district's participation in greater detail at your earliest convenience. I will make myself available by virtual meeting or by phone whenever your schedule allows. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you about a time to further discuss your school district's participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Kari Hawkey, Researcher
Ric Dressen, Dissertation Chair

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in Research

Greetings,

You are receiving this invitation to determine your interest in participating in a research study related to virtual instruction. This study is being conducted as part of the doctoral studies of the researcher and results of the study will be presented in a dissertation. The goals of the study are to understand participant experiences as a teacher at the middle school level. Specifically, I will ask questions related to your experiences, perspective, and knowledge of instruction and discipline practices within the virtual environments.

Participants who express interest will be selected to be a part of a semi-structured interview with the researcher. Participant identities will be protected via the use of a coded pseudonym in documents relating to the study and the paper presenting results of the study. Participants who are selected should expect to spend approximately 30-60 minutes in an interview setting.

There are no anticipated risks to participating in this research study. Information from this study may benefit others now or in the future as I learn more about practices in virtual middle schools. The results of this research may help decision-makers and professionals gain insights into how novel practices could contribute to improved student outcomes.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you about your possible interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Kari Hawkey, Researcher
Ric Dressen, Dissertation Chair

Appendix D: Survey Form for Participation

1. How many years have you been a teacher?
    a. 1-5
    b. 6-10
    c. 11-15
    d. 16-20
    e. 20-25
    f. 26+
2. How many years have you taught in this district?
    a. 1-5
    b. 6-10
    c. 11-15
    d. 16-20
    e. 20-25
    f. 26+
3. What year were you trained in PBIS?
    a. 2002-2006
    b. 2007-2010
    c. 2011-2014
    d. 2015-2019
    e. 2020-present
4. How many years have you been using Culturally Responsive practices?
    a. 1-3
    b. 4-6
    c. 7-10
    d. 11-15
    e. 16-20
5. Are you willing to participate in an interview with the researcher?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Maybe. I would like more information.

Appendix D: Consent Form for Participation

Greetings,

My name is Kari Hawkey, a doctoral student at Concordia University St. Paul. I am conducting a study on virtual instruction in California. You have been selected to participate in this study. As a participant, you will participate in an interview. Sessions will be audio recorded for reliability purposes. The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

In order to protect the confidentiality of all participants in the study, the following numerical coding procedures will be followed:

- All participants will be assigned a code number.
- Participants' names will not be placed on any assessment materials.
- Only the researcher will have access to the recordings.
- The key for the coding system and all project materials will be kept in protected storage.
- Upon completion of the project, the key for the codes will be destroyed.

Before publishing, participants will be provided with the results of the study and will have an opportunity to add to or clarify the findings before the paper is published.

A copy of this consent form is provided to each participant. Additional information concerning the procedures of this research project can be obtained by contacting the following individuals

Kari Hawkey, Researcher
hawkeyk@csp.edu

Frederick Dressen, Dissertation Chair
dressen@csp.edu

Institutional Review Board
Concordia University St. Paul
203 Thompson Hall
651-641-8723
irb@csp.edu

I have read the description of the above research study and agree to participate. I understand that participation is on a voluntary basis and I may withdraw from the project at any time. I also understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form and may request a copy of the major findings of the study at the conclusion of the project.

Participants Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Participant Demographic Information (for researcher only)

- Name and Current Role
- Current School Site
- Total Years Teaching
- Years in District
- Years PBIS Trained
- Years using Culturally Responsive practices

Table 2

Interview Protocol with Research Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
1. How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during in-person classroom instruction?	1. Think back to when we were teaching and learning in person. What influence, if any, did Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS have on your approach to classroom management in the in-person classroom environment? d. How about your approach to lesson planning and instruction (in the in-person classroom environment)? e. How about your approach to assessments and student success (in the in-person classroom environment)? f. How about your approach to student engagement and discipline (in the in-person classroom environment)?
2. How do middle school teachers trained in Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS view their training as influencing their instruction and disciplinary practices during virtual classroom instruction?	2. Think about the current teaching and learning virtually. What influence, if any, do Culturally Responsive practices and PBIS have on your approach to classroom management in the virtual classroom environment? d. How about your approach to lesson planning and instruction (in the virtual classroom environment)? e. How about your approach to assessments and student success (in the virtual classroom environment)? f. How about your approach to student engagement and discipline (in the virtual classroom environment)?

Research Question	Interview Question
3. How do teachers understand their experiences in the virtual classroom environment as impacting their instruction, classroom management, or discipline practices when schools return to in-person classroom instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic?	3. What new classroom management strategies do you use during virtual learning that you did not use in-person? How did these new strategies work for you? Do you have any stories about this that you would like to share? d. What new lesson planning and instructional strategies do you use? e. What new assessment and student success strategies do you use? f. What new student engagement and discipline strategies do you use? 4. What additional supports or training might you want after experiencing the virtual learning environment?