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It is hard to overstate the plight of African-American boys and young men in our education system today. The gap between their performance and that of their peers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds is perceptible from the first day of kindergarten, and only widens thereafter. In the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress—the massive, federally mandated report card on student performance, measured in grades four, eight, and 12—the reading scores of African-American boys in eighth grade were barely higher than the scores of White girls in fourth grade. In math, 46% of African-American boys demonstrated “basic” or higher grade-level skills, compared with 82% of White boys. One out of every three Black boys born today can expect to be sentenced to prison, compared to 1 out of 6 Latino boys and, one out of 17 White boys (NAACP, 2021). Only 10 percent of African American males in the United States are deemed proficient in 8th grade reading, and only 52% are graduating from high school in a four-year period. Two issues that systematically and negatively impact African American males are disproportional rates of placement in special education and school suspensions after being placed in special education.

The purpose of my case study research project was to examine how key school personnel in a small district described their experiences in regard to African American male students’ suspensions and placement in special education. I also investigated participants’ experiences with using Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). In studying the Saint John’s School District (SJSD), I analyzed state-level, district-level, and school-level policies and data. I also conducted interviews with district-level and school-level participants from SJSD. After analyzing the data and policies and coding the interviews, I found that African American male

students in the SJSD are referred to special education at disproportionate rates when compared to other races. The African American males in SJSD experience educational difficulties and engage in behaviors that are deemed disruptive, therefore leading to high referrals to special education and high suspensions. In SJSD, participants at the school level are not familiar with the laws regarding disproportionate placement in special education, but the district-level special staff is familiar with the law and the ramifications of violating the law. The difference is concerning because students are placed in special education at the school level.

Based on my findings, I recommend that SJSD establish additional equitable procedures and programs to address low student performance and to address discipline incidents in the district. There is also a need for SJSD to implement all state mandated programs and to develop a culturally responsive professional development plan to address the needs of their marginalized students.

TOWARD A FREE APPROPRIATE PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN  
MALE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A CASE ANALYSIS OF CULTURALLY  
RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

by

Ray Horton

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Approved by

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Dr. Craig Peck  
Committee Chair

## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this dissertation to my two daughters, Ebony and Rayven, my greatest creations and greatest inspirations. I also honor all my deceased grandparents for always telling me that I could be anything that I wanted to be. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to the local housing projects in my hometown that reared me. There would be no me without you. No matter my title, I will always be a Project-Kid for life!*

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

It is hard to overstate the plight of African-American boys and young men in our education system today. The gap between their performance and that of their peers is perceptible from the first day of kindergarten and only widens thereafter. In the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress—the massive, federally mandated report card on student performance, measured in grades four, eight, and 12—the reading scores of African-American boys in eighth grade were barely higher than the scores of White girls in fourth grade. In math, 46% of African-American boys demonstrated “basic” or higher grade-level skills, compared with 82% of White boys. On the National Education Longitudinal Survey, 54% of 16-year-old African-American males scored below the 20th percentile, compared with 24% of White males and 42% of Hispanic males. Having well-educated parents did not close the gap: In 2006, 43% of Black high school seniors with at least one college-educated parent failed to demonstrate even basic reading comprehension, nearly twice the percentage of Whites (Kilp, 2010). On the 2020 Condition of Education report, the percentage of exiting students who graduated with a regular high school diploma was highest for Asian students, 79%, and lowest for Black students, 66%. The percentage of exiting students who received an alternative certificate was highest for Black students, 12%, and lowest for American Indian/Alaska Native students, 4%. In sum, Black male students endure difficult educational circumstances.

### **Statement of the Problem**

One out of every three Black boys born today can expect to be sentenced to prison, compared to one out of six Latino boys and one out of 17 White boys (NAACP, 2021). Only 10 percent of African American males in the United States are deemed proficient in 8th-grade reading, and only 52% are graduating from high school in a 4-year period. Losen and Martinez

(2020) conducted a study in conjunction with UCLA to produce a civil rights report on how disparate school discipline continues to drive differences in learning opportunities. They found that “Black students are the racial group that loses the most instruction in 43 states” (p. 8). Losen and Martinez (2020) also noted,

students with disabilities at the secondary level lost 68 days per 100 students enrolled, which was about twice as much for secondary students without disabilities. Even more alarming disparities are observed when we look at race with gender: Black boys lost 132 days per 100 students enrolled. (p. vi)

Existing research indicates that African American males are placed in special education programs at high rates and often with a mislabeled diagnosis. Booth et al. (2016) noted that “one of the most cited educational barriers facing African American males is their over-representation in special education and how often they are mislabeled as emotionally disturbed and intellectually disabled” (p. 88). Labeling and misplacement in special education create barriers to post-secondary success. Ladson Billings (2011) stated that “Of Black boys who enter special education, only 10% return to regular classrooms permanently and only 27% ever graduate” (p. 8). For these reasons, the Office of Special Education monitors the disproportionate placement of students of color in special education throughout all of the school districts in the United States.

Scholars investigated the schooling experiences of African American students, particularly African American male students, in the area of school discipline. These scholarly investigations have focused on the common phenomenon of the discipline gap that often occurs in many K-12 educational environments, particularly in urban school settings (Lewis et al., 2008). Namely, many of these studies over the past 3 decades have identified the most frequent

targets of unfair discipline practices—African American males (Lewis et al., 2008; Townsend, 2000).

The research literature underscores the fact that African American males are no more likely than their racial and ethnic peers to be discipline problems in the classroom; however, many schools and school districts, particularly in urban environments, continue to mete out harsher discipline punishments to this cohort of students. Wright and Ford (2016) noted, “the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) reported that African American males are suspended more than any other racial group, beginning in preschool” (p. 7).

Further problematizing this situation, there is limited research literature linking the impact that harsher discipline punishments exact on the performance of African American males in the classrooms, specifically their performance on standardized tests. Raffaele Mendez and Knoff (2003) found that African American children account for 17% of the student population, yet they constitute approximately 33% of all suspensions. Additionally, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) observed similar dynamics in a study they completed, reporting that while African Americans made up 58% of students referred to the office for defiance-related infractions, they constituted only 30% of the total student enrollment. Contrastingly, their White peers comprised only 5% of defiance referrals and made up roughly 37% of the student body. Losen and Martinez (2020) noted, “secondary students with disabilities in North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Delaware, and Missouri lost between 119 and 137 days per 100 students enrolled. In every state, students with disabilities lost more instruction than their nondisabled peers” (p. vi).

In North Carolina, the Policies and Procedures That Govern Special Education afford individuals with disabilities the right to due process for out-of-school suspensions. Students with disabilities cannot be suspended beyond 10 days without participating in a Manifestation

Determination (MD) meeting to determine if the conduct in question is a result of their disability. If the behavior is related, then the student is not suspended; however, if the behavior is not related, then students with disabilities are suspended the same as regular education students. In my experience, a typical MD meeting mostly, if not always, results in the behavior not being related to the student's disability, and the decision is made on feelings with disregard for the facts related to the disability. It is often considered how several suspensions or a long-term suspension greater than 10 days impacts the achievement of the student that requires specially designed instruction. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), in August 2016, issued a "letter of significant guidance" reminding educators across the country that even suspensions less than 10 days count constitute a denial of their obligation to provide FAPE (as cited in Losen & Martinez, 2020, p. 25).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study was to examine how key school personnel in a small district described their experiences in regard to African American male students' suspensions and placement in special education. I also investigated whether and how participants used Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL). I examined the ways in which context affects how CRL was interpreted and enacted across the small high-poverty school district. Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) involves school and district building leaders building a cultural proficiency framework through culturally responsive pedagogy that begins with self-reflection. Self-reflection provides opportunities for growth and development as a leader. Khalifa et al. (2016) noted, "leaders must also promote culturally responsive school environments. This outcome happens through resisting exclusionary practice; promoting inclusivity, Indigenous youth identities; and integrating student culture in all aspects of schooling" (pp. 1296–1297).



## **Research Questions**

My study addressed the following questions:

1. What are current data in the district around suspensions and special education placement for African American male students?
2. How do key school personnel in the district describe their experiences in regard to African American male students' suspensions and placement in special education?
3. According to participants, to what degree have culturally responsive leadership practices been implemented in the district to address these issues?

## **Background Context**

African American males are traditionally placed in special education for emotional and intellectual disabilities. Public policy and court cases address the disproportionate placement of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Cruz and Rodl (2018) noted that “This was evident in the cases of *Larry P. v. Riles*, *PASE v. Hannon (1980)*, and *Diana v. State Board of Education (1970)* when students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds were disproportionately placed in what the courts considered to be ““dead-end classes”” that focused on functional curriculum with little opportunity for academic advancement” (p. 50). Many states are implementing a Response to Intervention (RTI) model to address disproportionate placement in special education for certain categories.

African American students have also historically been suspended disproportionately. Gregory et al. (2010) noted, “The Children Defense Fund (1975) first brought the issue of racial disproportionality to national attention, showing that Black students were two to three times overrepresented in school suspensions compared with their enrollment rates in localities across the nation” (p. 59). African American males are disproportionately suspended as early as

preschool. Wright and Ford (2016) stated, “The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) reported that African American males are suspended more than any other racial group, beginning in preschool” (p. 7). In-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions serve as exclusionary practices. Exclusionary practices negatively impact the achievement and opportunity gaps for African American males, therefore leading many to drop out and become exposed to the school-to-prison pipeline and negative post-secondary outcomes.

### **Brief Description of Methods**

I utilized case study methodology in examining the special education experience for African American males in a small high-poverty school district. Yin (2006) noted, “the case study method is best applied when research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions and aims to produce firsthand understanding of people and events” (p. 112). My study meets the criteria established by Yin (2006) since my research questions produced descriptive answers, explanatory answers, and firsthand perspectives from the participants and their experiences. In my study, I analyzed the following documents: discipline data, special education referral data, school improvement plans, professional development schedules, and reports from the state’s department of education to review for data and the change in the data over time as well as the culturally responsive practices currently being implemented.

I also conducted interviews with key school personnel, including district-level special education leadership, members of school leadership teams from three of the district’s schools, and school-level special education staff or staff with special education experience. My study focused on the district as the case. I accessed personnel from one of the district’s elementary schools and its middle school and high school in order to gain insight into practices across all grade levels in the district.

## **Conceptual Framework: Culturally Responsive School Leadership**

My study was guided by the four behaviors of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) as detailed by Khalifa et al. (2016):

- **Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors:** the leader needs to have an awareness of self and his/her values, beliefs, and/or dispositions when it comes to serving poor children of color.
- **Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers:** the school leader has a crucial role in ensuring that teachers are and remain culturally responsive.
- **Creates Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment:** the school leader challenges the status quo by interrogating exclusionary and marginalizing behaviors.
- **Engaging Student, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts:** highlights the ability of the school leader to engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways.

Khalifa al. (2016) provided insight into the central elements of CRSL. They note, “This comprehensive review provides a framework for the expanding body of literature that seeks to make not only teaching, but rather the entire school environment, responsive to the schooling needs of minoritized students” (p. 1272). African American males with disabilities are historically marginalized in the areas of race and disability. I utilized this framework of CRSL to structure how I studied how personnel in a small district discussed addressing African American males with disabilities, including their placement in special education and their suspensions after being placed in special education. I used the criteria from the four tenets of CRSL to develop my interview questions and scripts and also asked participants directly about their knowledge and use of CRSL.

## **Researcher Experience**

I began my career in education as a lateral entry Alternative Education Teacher at a middle school in my hometown. My students were all male and consisted of the worst-behaved students in the school. Their racial and ethnic backgrounds included Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian, and the majority were African American. We were placed in the basement of the school in an old woodshop classroom with no heat or air conditioner, half walls, damaged floors, rats, roaches, birds flying, and no windows. The students were not allowed to enter or exit the school with the other students, attend classes upstairs, or eat lunch and breakfast in the cafeteria. They were locked down all day long and placed on a token economics system that provided them the chance to earn their way out of the program. However, it was evident that the principal never intended for the students to return to the regular population.

When I entered education as a novice via the lateral entry program, I recall in new teacher orientation the emphasis on creating procedures to establish classroom management for my self-contained class of mostly Black males. My students learned and adhered to the procedures, and I experienced praise and accolades for the control that I gained over the students; however, I failed to realize that my procedures resembled prison regulations. Black boys made up the majority of my self-contained classroom; sadly, none of them experienced success in high school, and more than half of them experienced jail and prison. Unfortunately, some of them also experienced early death. I also recognized that the White, Hispanic, and Asian male students in the class experienced the same high school and legal plight as the Black boys.

My experiences with Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) resulted from my tenure as an Alternative Education and Exceptional Children teacher and as a district-level Behavior Specialist. My experience includes small, medium, and large school districts in North

Carolina. The MDR process is done differently regardless of the size of the district. However, the end results are the same for students with disabilities, especially Black males with disabilities. They participate in the MDR process, and the administrators make decisions based on bias and past interactions with the student. Most decisions are predetermined by the administrator, and the participants on the MDR team are selected to agree with the administrator's decision. The MDR meeting is often the gateway to the administrator recommending long term-suspension. If the student's behavior is a result of the disability, the long-term suspension request is denied; however, if the disability is not related, then the student is suspended long-term. More than likely, the incident is not the student's first for the year, or the offense was serious. Administrators tend to view serious incidents as high profile and require a swift response to maintain order. Also, numerous negative interactions between student offenders and disciplining administrators lead to long-term suspension requests. The one special education staff member on the MDR team is often the minority and viewed as enabling the student because of the student's disability. Based on my experience, most MDR meetings result in the official determination that the student's behavior was not related to his or her disability; therefore, they are often suspended long-term.

I became an advocate for social justice for the students and empowered them beyond all expectations. Once the behaviors were eliminated, I discovered their academic deficits. It was evident that negative behavior became an escape for them when they were faced with academic difficulties that led to placement in special education for some or designation for potential placement for others. My experience during my first year of teaching seventeen years ago infused a passion that motivates me to continue advocating for those who are treated unjustly.

## Significance of the Study

The challenges experienced by African American males in the public education system are not new phenomena. From slavery to Jim Crow Laws and as recently as No Child Left Behind, people of color have historically been marginalized and oppressed based on systemic policies and laws. All American citizens are entitled to democracy based on the rights provided by the Constitution. *Brown v Board of Education* provided educational rights for all citizens regardless of their race through access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Democracy in education is the application of social justice as a tool to address historical barriers and systems for potentially unjust issues. Barriers include systems of oppression, a sense of privilege and entitlement, and the unawareness of the need to adapt.

Historical policies and safeguard protections are in place to protect the rights of African American males with disabilities; however, they often end up creating disproportionalities in African American males' educational experiences, especially in special education placement and suspensions. Suspensions and expulsions serve as exclusionary practices that lead to African American males dropping out of school and increasing the possibility of criminal justice referrals. Placement in special education results in barriers to post-secondary success. Booth et al. (2016) noted that "The U.S. Department of Labor (2012) indicated that individuals with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and earn, on average, one million dollars less over their lifespan than a person without a disability and a high school diploma" (p. 88).

My case study highlights the need for social justice and attention to the democratic rights afforded to all individuals, with emphasis on African American males with disabilities, particularly in regard to disproportionate placement and suspensions established intentionally and unintentionally by policy and practices. Through this research, I contribute to the literature

regarding the experiences of African American males with disabilities in public schools as well as research related to equitable practices to reduce their marginalization and unjust experiences.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In this chapter, I described the plight of African American boys and young men in the public education system. I discussed the historical nature of the problem of the over-placement of African American males in special education programs and how laws put in place as procedural safeguards often lead to disproportionate placement. I introduced my case study methodology as well as my conceptual framework of Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL). I also detailed my personal experiences in special education and working with African American males.

In Chapter 2, I share the existing research regarding special education policy and the disproportionate placement of African American males. I review the literature in terms of the African American male experience in public schools. The literature provides insight into their early experience, school buildings serving as barriers, and schools serving prison preparation programs. Existing research further indicates the need for equitable disciplinary practices. I conclude the chapter by reviewing the need for Culturally Responsive Leadership.

In Chapter 3, I discuss my methods for conducting my study in the form of a case study. Then in Chapter 4, I start by discussing special education operations in the Saint John's School District before describing how special education proceeds in the three schools. I conclude the chapter by describing the main themes that emerged from my study. Finally, in Chapter 5, I summarize my study and answer my research questions. Importantly, I engage in analysis by connecting my findings to existing research. I conclude by providing recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and my final thoughts.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) ensures that all children with a disability are guaranteed a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. There are 14 disability categories; however, African American males are traditionally classified in the following areas: emotionally or intellectually disabled. Booth et al. (2016) illustrated how culturally sensitive school-family-community collaborations facilitated positive outcomes for African American males with learning disabilities and noted that “one of the most often cited educational barriers facing African American males is their over-representation in special education and how often they are mislabeled as emotionally disturbed and intellectually disabled” (p. 88). The IDEA 2004 allowed states to review local implementation and procedures towards disproportionality of racial groups. According to U.S. Department of Education NCES (2000), Black male students represent 9% of the total enrollees in public education; however, 20% of those students are classified as having a mental retardation (as cited in Alqarni, 2016).

In this literature review, I begin by considering scholarship related to the plight of African American boys in special education. I examine special education policy and the disproportionate placement of Black students in special education programs. Then, I discuss what the research literature has to share about the experiences that African American males have in public schools and with discipline in schools. I next examine the need for equitable disciplinary safeguards and practices. Finally, I close with a discussion about the need for Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL).



## **Special Education Policy and Disproportionate Placement of African American Males**

The decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* held that it was unconstitutional for educational institutions to segregate by race. The monumental land mark case provided future implications for special education. Conner and Ferri (2005) (as cited in Banks, 2017) stated that following the *Brown v. Board* desegregation decision, special education ostensibly became an alternative avenue to segregate African American students based on presumed academic, psychological, and cultural deficits. In the same study, Conner and Ferri (2005) reported that following the *Brown* decision, Washington D.C. public school officials designated 24% of the school systems' newly admitted African American students as students with special needs (as cited in Banks, 2017). Consequently, African American students came to represent 77% of the special education population.

Just as the Civil Rights Act and *Brown vs. Board of Education* set in motion shifts in state and local education agency (LEA) practice to racially desegregate public schools, Public Law 94-142 of 1975-now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-mandated a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities (Thorius, 2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) originated from the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. IDEA. Oswald et al. (1999) (as cited in Cruz & Rodl, 2018) defined special education disproportionality as the extent to which membership in a given group, such as gender, race/ethnicity, or socioeconomic strata, differently affects the probability of being labeled as having a disability and placed in special education.

Additional landmark legal cases followed *Brown* in addressing African American student placement in special education programs. In *Larry P. v. Riles (1979)* the court decided in favor of the plaintiffs who claimed the over-representation of African American students in classes for

learners with intellectual disabilities were a result of inappropriate standardized intelligence quotient (IQ) testing, assessment practices, and teacher bias (as cited in Banks, 2017). The historically high disproportionate identification and placement of students from racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse background in special education resulted in amendments to IDEA policy.

The 2004 amendment to IDEA (referred to as IDEA 2004) required early intervention for students, greater accountability and improved educational outcomes. It also, raised the standards for special education instructors. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 stipulates that the special education assessment process include a nondiscriminatory evaluation by multidisciplinary team, and that there is consideration of the maximum benefits and risks associated with a given placement (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). The amendment also required states to demand that local school districts shift up to 15 percent of their special education grant funds toward general education professional development and intervention strategies to address the disproportionate number of minority groups placed in special education for reasons other than disability. The amended policy and its attendant financial penalties addressing the disproportionality of African American males resulted in states changing their policies and operating procedures for determining special education eligibility.

### **Disproportional Placement**

The policy history provides insight into why African American males experience disproportional placement in special education. Banks (2017) noted that “African American male students represent only 9% of the total school age population. Yet, they constitute a third of the students in public education with an intellectual disability” (p. 96). Statistics from the United States Department of Education indicate that in the category of learning disability and emotional

disturbance, African American males are disproportionately represented, accounting for 12% and 21% (2006). Quantitative depictions of disproportionality of African American males in special education can be characterized as an epidemic catastrophe (Banks, 2017).

Craft and Howley (2018) studied nine African American students' experiences in secondary special education and produced the following themes: "1. Most cases students found that the negative consequences of their special education placement outweighed any benefits. 2. Limited benefits of placement included interactions with responsive teachers and, in a few cases, more suitable instructional pacing. 3. Negative consequences included the experience of being stigmatized by peers, making limited academic progress because of a slow-paced curriculum, and confronting barriers that kept them from returning to general education placement" (p. 1). The study also found that traumatic events in the student's lives played a role in their special education placement. "Rather than supporting the students through a difficult phase of their lives, educators used special education referral and placement as a form of victim blaming" (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 1). Poor instruction, culturally mismatched classrooms, poverty, and systemic bias are causes identified in the study.

Ahram et al. (2011) explored how the social construct of the normal child became racialized through the special education referral and classification process, and subsequently produces disproportionality. There are 14 special education disability eligibility areas and they can be organized into two categories (a) subjective/interpretive and (b) medically classified. Placement in the subjective areas are based on the interpretation of test results. Learning Disabled (LD), Emotionally Disabled, and Intellectual Disability (ID) are some examples of subjective areas. Medical placement is the result of a certified medical condition. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Hearing Impairment (HI), and Visually Impaired (VI) are some examples of

medical disabilities. African American students are disproportionately classified in subjective categories. In 2011, Ahram et al noted that Native American and African American students have a higher risk of being classified as having a disability; moreover, this risk increases drastically when looking at specific categories, as well when comparing the risk of being classified with soft or judgmental disability compared with a hard disability category that is tied more closely to a medical diagnosis. Their research discovered that African American students are more than twice as likely to be classified as being emotionally disturbed (ED) as compared with all other students and nearly 2 1/3 times more likely to be classified as being mentally retarded as compared with all other students (Ahram et al., 2011). Ahram et al. (2011) explained, “Ethnographic research carried out in schools has shown that the placement of students in special education is based on the assumptions and beliefs of several individuals who, in their formal and informal evaluation of students, construct notions of student ability” (p. 2238). Valencia and Suzuki (2000) noted controversy in using intelligence testing for placement in special education; however, they also found that not using intelligence testing would result in more subjective placement decisions.

In 2016, Alqarni studied the causes of disproportionality of African American students within special education program. Marginalization by teachers providing inadequate effort in teaching and conveying information, discriminatory segregation, crisis in violation linked to schools’ policies and admission process, lack of appropriate teachers, and unfair low social and academic expectations towards are some of the causes of disproportionality (Alqarni, 2016). Often the blame is placed on the student for not learning the curriculum versus the effectiveness of the content delivery from the teacher. Teaching should address the multiple learning styles of students. Discriminatory segregations suggest that African American students are excluded from

taking preparatory classes need for college admission. Instead of altering the content delivery and mode of instruction students are deemed incapable of learning; therefore, leading to them being placed in marginalized classes. Often unintentional policies enforced by schools without using a culturally responsive leadership lens produce unjust barriers for traditionally marginalized students. Many urban schools are understaffed with highly qualified teachers; therefore, most schools utilize new unexperienced staff to teach struggling students will utilizing stronger and experienced teachers to teach highly gifted and honors courses. Alqarni (2016) noted the following strategies for addressing disproportionality: “Equal opportunities for a tertiary education, strengthen advocacy for a more institutionalized assessment of students deemed fit for special education, avoiding personal bias and homogeneity, policy makers should strengthen promotion for equal access in education with bills to protect student’s civil rights, and mass media should revolutionize its portrayal of African Americans” (pp. 7–8).

### **The African American Male Experience in Schools**

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) reported that African American males, beginning in preschool, are suspended more than any other racial group (as cited in Wright & Ford, 2016). African American boys are stigmatized at an early age with negative labels that often follow them throughout their public education experience. Isolation and placement away from their normal classroom setting create unequitable learning opportunities and social and emotional development opportunities.

#### **Early School Experience**

In 2016, Wright and Ford studied the overrepresentation of African Americans regarding suspensions and expulsions as early as prekindergarten and the following theme emerged: “African American children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 42% of the preschool

children suspended once, and 48% of the preschool children suspended more than once” (p. 7). Tensions between love versus hate, fear and control, and infantilization versus criminalization are behaviors associated with schooling that Gloria Ladson-Billings (2011) discussed. Ladson-Billings (2011) argued that “the clothes, the style, the language, and the effects of young, Black, urban males are visible throughout the nation and world. It has left an indelible mark on Madison Avenue, Hollywood, and most forms of media” (p. 9). The emergent theme is that dominant White society has love for certain cultural aspects of Black males expressed in the form of imitation; however, beyond professional athletes and actors the common Black male endures systemic exclusionary practices in their pursuit of democracy.

Ladson-Billings observed more regulation and control policies in schools with a high African American population compared to schools with a small African American population. “They were required to wear uniforms, they had to line up in a particular way, they were prohibited from talking in social spaces like hallways and cafeteria. There is only one analogy to this kind of regulation – prison” (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 10). Dress codes and Standard Mode of Dress (SMOD) are barriers and additional behavior infractions that resemble the regulations in prisons that Ladson-Billings mentioned.

### **School Buildings Serve as Barriers for African American Males**

Schools serve as an unintentional barrier for many Black boys. Ladson-Billings (2011) noted that “we could rest easier if the site of Black boys’ problems were their homes with their parents and siblings, or the streets with police and law enforcement but one of the primary places where Black boys’ problems appear is in school” (p. 12). It is hard to overstate the plight of African-American boys and young men in our education system today. The gap between their

performance and that of their peers is perceptible from the first day of kindergarten, and only widens thereafter.

In the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress — the massive, federally mandated report card on student performance, measured in grades 4, 8, and 12 — the reading scores of African-American boys in eighth grade were barely higher than the scores of White girls in fourth grade. In math, 46% of African-American boys demonstrated “basic” or higher grade-level skills, compared with 82% of White boys. On the National Education Longitudinal Survey, 54% of 16-year-old African-American males scored below the 20th percentile, compared with 24% of White males and 42% of Hispanic males. Having well-educated parents did not close the gap: In 2006, 43% of Black high-school seniors with at least one college-educated parent failed to demonstrate even basic reading comprehension, nearly twice the percentage of Whites (Kilp, 2010).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines “mattering” as to be important, and “comprehensive” as to include everything. Roderick Carey (2019) coined the term comprehensive mattering, he argues the need for comprehensive mattering of Black boys and young men in society and schools. “With this approach individuals serve as agents of comprehensive mattering and resist enacting cultural forces that compel exploitative and narrow social and school outcomes for Black boys and young men” (Carey, 2019 p. 383). Carey (2019) also noted that “Black boys and young men find their social and school lives framed by marginal mattering, which is realized through social and educational practices that criminalize, dismiss, and propel them into school failure” (p. 370).

## **Schools Serve as Prison Preparation Programs**

Schools serve a role in African American males entering the school to prison pipeline (Gregory et al., 2010). The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational (2006) explains the school to prison pipeline as the negative school experiences that persistently route African American males away from school and into juvenile justice systems (as cited in Townsend Walker, 2012). Western and Pettit (2000) produced findings that indicated youth who drop out of school are most likely to be incarcerated at some point during their lifetime (as cited in Townsend Walker, 2012). “By their mid-30s, six out of ten Black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison” (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 8).

Suspensions and expulsions from school contribute to preparing African American males for prison. African Americans are twice as likely to be suspended as their White peers. In 2020, Fisher et al. (2020) noted the 2014 U.S. Department of Education report stated that “in the 2013-14 school year, Black students were 3.8 times more likely to experience one or more out-of-school suspensions and 1.9 times more likely to be expelled than their White peers” (p. 1). White students were more likely than Black students to break more obvious policies such as fighting, while Black students were more than likely than White students to face exclusion for subjective reasons. Subjective disciplinary practices lack the consideration of cultural sensitivity and disregard disabling categorizations during the decision-making process; therefore, the suspending administrator often base suspensions on personal beliefs and their reaction to the behavior. Students who were diagnosed with emotional mental health issues are suspended for disrespect, profanity, or failure to follow directives, which disregards the student’s mental health diagnosis; therefore, this leads to marginalizing the student through policy. This hyper focus on discipline in relation to African American boys points to culturally insensitive institutional



practices (e.g., zero tolerance policies) and barriers that ultimately aggravate and compromise the well-being of this population (Wright & Ford, 2016).

African American males are retained at disproportionate rates and grade level retention policies are linked to drop outs and preparation for the correctional system. Townsend Walker (2012) cited a 2002 longitudinal study that found that 27% of 10th grade African American males had been retained at least once throughout their schooling careers. In comparison, 18% of the Hispanic students and 13% of the White students were retained once. Certain school policies and practices set African American males on a trajectory of early school leaving, or dropping out.

### **The Need for Equitable Disciplinary Practices**

#### **Exclusionary Policies**

Exclusionary policies are those that require students to be away from the regular education setting. In-school suspensions, detentions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions are exclusionary practices encountered by African American males. Exclusionary policies negatively impact African American male's academic achievement and social development. Townsend (2000) stated "disciplinary measures that exclude African American students may create a domino effect that further widens that achievement gap (p. 382). Incomplete assignments, make up assignments and test, social opportunities, and face-to-face teacher instruction are all negatively impacted when students are excluded from school. Zero-Tolerance policies are broad policies produced to ensure safety in schools and treat all offenders in the same manner.

However, the focus on treating all students the same has a negative effect on students with disabilities. Lashley and Tate (2009) discussed the origins of zero-tolerance policies "to

address concerns about safety as a result of several deadly violent incidents in the nation's schools, Congress passed the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994" (p. 26). The act mandated that schools that received federal funding expel any student found in possession of a weapon on school grounds. The GFSA was later incorporated into the Safe and Drug-Free School Policy. Students with disabilities are afforded rights based on the provisions of IDEA "compliance with GFSA can be achieved consistent with the requirements that apply to students with disabilities as long as discipline of such students is determined on a cases-by-case basis in accordance with IDEA and Section 504" (Lashley & Tate, 2009, p. 29). Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) meetings are conducted to determine if the student's action was a result of his or her disability. Lashley and Tate (2009) also noted that "current disciplinary practices are punitive" (p. 30).

### **IDEA Safeguard Protection**

IDEA provides safeguard protection for students with disabilities. IDEA prohibits out of school suspensions beyond 10 days for students with disabilities. A Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) meeting is required at the 10-day mark to determine if the student's offense is related to their disability. The end results are if the offense is related to the disability then the student cannot be suspended; however, if the offense is not related then the student is punished the same as non-disabled peers (34 CFR 300.532, U.S. DOE, 2010).

Fisher et al. (2020) conducted a study using DisCrit theory to examine the MDR policy. Annamma et al. (2013) defined DisCrit as an extension of critical race and disability study theories through acknowledging the interconnectedness of race and disability as interlocking socially constructed paradigms in the context of historical systemic educational inequities (as cited in Fisher et al., 2020). In 2020, Fisher et al.'s (2020) use of DisCrit also found there is a

lack of empirical evidence examining the outcomes of MDR decisions by race, vague guidelines in constructing the MDR team, and lack of requiring a disability expert (Psychologist) involved with the process.

### **Alternative Discipline Practices**

Alternative discipline practices need to be examined and implemented to address the diversity in public education. Mansfield et al. (2018) examined Leadership for Social Justice in the area of discipline. The study provides a guide for using restorative practice as an alternative disciplinary approach by providing an overview of racially based discipline practices in schools, the philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice, successful implementation of practices, and the vision for institutional change. The restorative approach aims to build empathy and interest in others while also allowing all parties to freely express feelings of anger, fear, and humiliation. Restorative justice utilizes a three-tiered system: Tier 1 elements modeled by everyone school wide. Tier 2 elements such as talking circles, targeted to specific groups and in specific settings aimed at developing, maintaining, or repairing harmed relationships, depending on whether they are preventive or responsive. Tier 3 involves the restorative conference and is the rarest of components. A restorative conference is led by a trained facilitator that brings together those involved. It focuses on what happened, who was affected, and what needs to be done to make it right.

### **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)**

States continue to address the disproportionate placement of students in special education through policy. In July 2020, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction implemented a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) designed to provide evidence-based intervention strategies to address the disproportionate placement of African American males in special

education as learning disabled. MTSS is a result of the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). Utley and Obiakor (2015) researched perspectives on the multi-tiered system of support and stated, “evidence-based programs and interventions targeting special education programs fall within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) which consists of increased instructional time, interventions, and improved educational outcome for students in general and special education” (p. 1). The MTSS system is a multi-tiered continuous improvement system based on evidence-based practices for students struggling with academics and behavior issues. The system replaced the old educational and intellectual testing requirements needed for placement and now utilizes the student’s response to the interventions before determining special education eligibility. “The MTSS framework consists of principles of response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) and integrate a continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and evidence-based practices for addressing barriers to student learning and discipline” (Utley & Obiakor, 2015, p. 1). Belser et al. (2016) outlined a model that integrates overlapping elements of the National Model and MTSS as supports for marginalized students of color exhibiting problem behaviors (p. 251). DeMatthews (2014) studied an urban school principal’s perspective regarding the disproportionate placement of marginalized students and the need for an RTI system to address special education placements. The principal noted that “a system is needed to ensure students are appropriately identified as a student with a disability” (DeMatthews, 2014, p. 26). “The American School Counselor Association National Model boasts a comprehensive, data-driven approach to meeting the needs of students and focuses on addressing students’ academic, personal, social and career needs” (Belser et al., 2016, p. 253). The development of a universal

screeners is essential to establishing an MTSS. The North Carolina model focuses on core support in the areas of instruction, curriculum, and environment.

### **Social Justice and Social Justice Leadership**

Many definitions exist on the topic of social justice; however, the common theme for all is the requirement of the leader to act in addressing the unjust. For example, Theoharis (2007) defines social justice leadership to mean that principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision. When social justice leaders recognize policies and procedures that perpetuate inequalities, they act. Social justice encompasses freedom for all people, the fair and moral treatment of all people, and efforts to prevent and remedy socioeconomic and political inequity especially when that inequity manifests via systematic forces and the civil and human rights violations of particular groups (Cooper, 2009).

Sherman and Mansfield (2014) defined the concept of social justice leadership in education and provided ideas on how to expand and apply the concept to teaching. The majority of programs for principal licensure offer instructional leadership, school law, curriculum development, research methods, teaching and learning, and the principalship; however, social justice leadership coursework is often not covered or taught. The vast changing demographics and diversity within today's schools have created a need for social justice leadership preparation. The authors link social justice to achievement gaps, citizenship in society, and structuring schools with heterogeneous learning environments. Equitable and just vision, questioning assumptions that drive policy, equity audits, and advocacy for the inclusion of democratic ideals are some of the ways explained to apply theory to practice in SJL. A paradigm shift or personal

value audit, traveling outside of comfort zones, and reliance on reading as opposed to actual implementation in classrooms are the implications discussed regarding bridging theory to practice in social justice. School leaders with social justice backgrounds seek to improve the educational outcomes for historically marginalized groups but confront daunting challenges when working with high-poverty districts.

It is irresponsible to prepare leaders to take on enormous challenges in social justice and face significant resistance without an understanding of how to weather the storm that will result. Curriculum, instructional practices, and internship opportunities incorporated into educational leadership programs provide the necessary training for administrators. For example, Cooper (2009) establishing alumni networks can also assist equity-oriented educators in finding support and forming alliances they need to be more effective. Due to the lack of training in the rights of students with disabilities disproportionalities result in misclassifications and high suspension rates. LSJ utilizes logic and reasoning when addressing unjust curriculums and discipline policies. For example, there appears to be a differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level wherein African-American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation (Skiba et al., 2002).

Preparation programs need to prepare social justice leaders to both enact and develop resistance in the face of significant barriers. To date researchers have done little to investigate or understand district-level policies in special education that help to substantiate such inequitable circumstances in schools (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). Both current and future school leaders need to develop the ability to identify areas of inequity that may extend beyond their previous experiences or areas of expertise. Administrators must be at the front of the line in

transforming schools into more equitable and just places. Addressing and overcoming barriers are the challenges in developing social justice leadership (S JL).

### **The Need for Culturally Responsive Leadership**

Culture is the set of practices and beliefs shared by members of a particular group that distinguishes one group from others. Culture includes all characteristics of human description, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, ancestry, religion, language, history, sexual orientation, physical and mental level of ableness, occupation, and other affiliations.

### **Cultural Proficiency**

Cultural proficiency is the policies and practices of an organization or the values and behavior of an individual that enable the person or institution to engage effectively with people and groups who are different from them. Cultural proficiency provides a comprehensive, systemic structure for school leaders to identify, examine, and discuss educational issues in our schools. The “tools” of cultural proficiency are processes that can be used by both historically dominated and dominant group members to replace old myths and stereotypes with images, information, and skills that equip them to have substantive dialogue that results in equitable actions within schools (Cross, 1989; Tappen, 2006, as cited in Lindsey et al., 2009). Lindsey et al. (2009) noted the four elements of cultural proficiency include:

- **The Barriers to Cultural Proficiency** provide persons and their organizations with the understandings that enable them to overcome resistance to change.
- **The Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency** are values related to issues that emerge in diverse environments and when engaging with people who are not members of the dominant culture.

- **The Cultural Proficiency Continuum** provides language to describe unhealthy and healthy values and behaviors of persons and policies and practices of organizations
- **The Essential Elements of Cultural Competence** serve as standards by which one develops healthy individual values/behaviors and organizational policies/practices (p. 59).

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership**

Recent literature on the purpose and structure of public education indicate that our schools are functioning based on an outdated model; however, Dr. Muhammad Khalifa actually explained the traditional (colonizing) school leadership model. “Colonial school leadership models focused on producing good citizens that would contribute to the economy. Schools were used as weapons to cleanse Indigenous peoples of their language, customs, and spiritual beliefs and practices” (Khalifa, 2019 p. 51). The issue with the traditional models is that society and the economy evolved over the years, but our public education system failed to change. Policy makers and funding sources continue to reflect the race, values, and culture of the social majority which in turn is the minority in many public-school systems.

As a requirement of a Free Appropriate Public Education, schools should provide a culturally relevant education. Culturally relevant education (Ladson-Billings, 1996) is concerned with connecting the curriculum to students’ home environments. It also includes modeling and instilling critical consciousness in young people so that they not only excel in school but also become cognizant of and committed to fighting societal inequalities (Lustick, 2017). Students must be able to make a personal connection to the curriculum in order to make the educational process meaningful.



Culturally responsive leadership challenges leaders to actively lead for social justice and the creating of an inclusive environment for all stakeholders. Cultural proficient educators demonstrate an understanding of diverse cultures each person may experience in the school setting. For students to learn what their teachers have to offer, they must feel fully appreciated as individuals within their own distinctive ethnic, socioeconomic background, genders, sexual orientations, and physical abilities.

A well-managed focus on diversity improves staff and student morale by improving the effectiveness of communication, reducing complaints, and creating a more comfortable and rewarding climate for all people in the school. The current education system is based on the traditional model of creating productive members of society to contribute to the economic advancement of society. The current model produces inequitable experiences for marginalized and oppressed students and families. In order to create equitable opportunities schools must engage with the following: parent involvement in schools, school/family/community partnerships, civic deliberation about education, and identify the school's role in community transformation.

Self-Reflection is a critical component in culturally responsive leadership, and it provides opportunities for growth and development as a leader. Self-advocacy skills empower marginalized students. Self-advocacy skills development is essential in the transition from a student to a functioning member of society. Understanding rights, the use of resources and opportunities, and identifying and understanding oppressive systems are the aim of the self-advocacy theory. Culturally responsive leadership challenges leaders to actively lead for social justice and the creation of an inclusive environment for all stakeholders.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) involves school and district building leaders building a cultural proficiency framework through culturally responsive pedagogy that begins with self-reflection. Creating supportive structures in school, building relationships with school staff and families, and maintaining social/family networks were integral aspects of organizing people around the school leaders to support this work and assist the administrator in navigating resistance (Theoharis, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Beginning as early as preschool age, African American males are labeled, referred to special education, and suspended at higher rates than any other race. Updates to the IDEA and other legislation designed to address the overrepresentation of marginalized ethnic groups in specific disabling categories often lead to overrepresentation in other categories to guarantee placement in special education programs. African American boys perform at a lower rate than any other ethnic and gender group in public education. Black, Latino, and Indigenous students perform worse on nearly every educational measure valued by U.S. schools (Khalifa et al., 2016). The disproportionate placement of African American boys in special education programs is not a new phenomenon; however, as new policies, research, and data continue to enhance the troubled plight of African American boys, suspensions and placement in special education programs continue to increase at a high frequency. When excluded from school, students are allowed to spend unsupervised time on the streets, further jeopardizing their social success (Townsend, 2000).

Failure to recognize, acknowledge, and commit to overcoming barriers is the result of a deficit model worldview. A deficit worldview legitimates the misuse of power, embraces privilege as inalienable, and holds that those who are not in the economic, social, and political

mainstream are solely responsible for their lot in life. Barriers include systems of oppression, a sense of privilege and entitlement, and the unawareness of the need to adapt. Power in the form of systemic oppression is represented by the inequities that persist due to past and prevalent policies and practices. People with a presumption of entitlement believe that they have acquired all the personal achievements and societal benefits they have solely on the basis of their own character and merit. Systems of oppression have two effects on those who are harmed and those who benefit; therefore, those who are harmed respond from an emotional connection, and those who benefit are oblivious to the negative effects of systemic oppression. Unawareness of the need to adapt is an issue struggled with by individuals that have issues with changes that involve oppression.

A culturally responsive leader is culturally proficient. A Culturally Responsive School Leader critically self-reflects on leadership behaviors. Leaders continuously investigate and problem-solve their policies and decisions with the intent of addressing and embracing diversity. CRSL leaders are transformative for social justice, therefore eliminating barriers for the unjust. Transformative leaders are committed to continuous learning of cultural knowledge and contexts.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

In schools across the country African American males are underachieving at an alarming rate compared to peers from other races and ethnicities. During my eighteen-year tenure in special education and as a former athletic coach I witnessed the unjust treatment of African American males with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. I also recall several of my childhood friends dropped out of school or engaged in criminal activities due to their lack of access to equitable resources and supports afforded to them by the public education system. Qualitative research inquiries into, documents, and interprets the meaning-making process (Mertens, 2009). Qualitative case studies capture and interpret the story of meaning into the world from the perspectives of those involved in and touched by the phenomena (Yin, 2006).

### **Methodology**

I utilized a case study as my methodology because it provided me with an opportunity to examine the Saint John's School District (SJSD) in depth. Doing case study research is similar to other qualitative research methods because they all involve reviewing the literature, defining research questions and analytic strategies, using formal data collection protocols or instruments, and writing good research reports. The case study method is best applied when research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions and aims to produce a firsthand understanding of people and events (Yin, 2006).

A key demand of the case study method is the investigator's skill and expertise in pursuing an entire (and sometimes subtle) line of inquiry at the same time as (and not after) data are being collected (Yin, 2006). During my interviews with the participants in the Saint John's School District, I often revised questions or asked follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. My profession has afforded me the opportunity to practice investigation and problem-

solving methods, and both are crucial for a good investigator conducting a case study. My study focused on researching the SJSD as the case and understanding how three schools reflected practices in the case study district.

### **Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study to familiarize myself with my proposed data collection strategies and to become familiar with the system that I plan to study. My pilot study offered essential reflection information to guide me in conducting my actual case study research for my dissertation. The pilot study interview allowed me to refine my interview questions to better reflect my research questions.

### **Pilot Interview**

Conducting the interview was a comfortable feeling based on my previous employment in various fields requiring a large amount of interviewing. This opportunity provided me with additional proof that every interview is different and you must be willing to adapt to the structure and flow of the interview in real-time. I also learned that when I structure interview questions, it is essential that I prepare for the little things that I often ignore based on experience and knowledge to eliminate any barriers for the interviewee. Participating in the interview process also allowed me the opportunity to identify times to prod the interviewee for additional information and check for their understanding of unfamiliar terms.

The initial person that I intended to interview canceled with short notice, and most of my preparation was for that particular person. Based on this situation, I wish that I had established a backup plan for my participant selection. Creating a list with several potentials and backups to the potentials is essential for conducting future interviews because an unexpected change in personnel also results in a change in the interviewer's perspective. I would also provide the

interviewee with a paper copy of all of the questions several days prior to the interview as well as provide additional terms for understanding within the document. I was surprised by the pace of the interview. I tried to limit the number of questions to avoid overwhelming the interviewee; however, I found during the process that the interviewees' unfamiliarity with the topic dictated a fast-paced interview.

As a researcher, I decided I needed to continue to refine my interview skills to meet the needs of research data collections. When I planned my case study protocols for conducting interviews I needed to focus more on the planning and preparation in order to conduct an effective interview. My interview with Rep 3 did provide me with reinforcement regarding the need for my study topic. School Board members are the policy makers for school districts; however, most members do not have an educational background and a lot of decisions are based on the information provided to board members by district and school staff. As an interviewer I also needed to refine and strengthen my note-taking during the interview so that the notes are legible and relevant several days after I conduct the interview. I found myself at times trying to keep up with the pace of the responses provided by the interviewee and I later had difficulty reading some of my field notes. The transcription process is another area of focus for me as I continue to refine my interview process skills. Often doing interviews outside the research world not require the documentation and submission of the transcribed interview; therefore, I adapted to the practice and not just jotting down key points in response to predetermined questions.

Based on the pilot study, I identified the interview participants needed to conduct the case study. Several district level special education administrators, and members from each school level's (elementary, middle, and high) school leadership team were the interviewees identified as needed to address my study's topic in more depth. The district level special education

administrators provide data from the state level regarding the disproportionality in special education placement and suspension. Interviews with the remaining participants addresses the special education disproportionality and the culturally responsive aspect of my study within a particular school district. I learned from the policy interview experience that I had to remain flexible with my participant selection; therefore, when I completed my protocol it did not require an interview specifically from a principal but rather a member of the school leadership team.

### **Research Questions**

As an advocate for social justice, I ensured that my study addressed the following qualitative research questions:

1. What are current data in the district around suspensions and Special Education (SPED) placement for African American male students?
2. How do key personnel in the district describe their experiences in regards to African American male student suspensions and placement in special education?
3. According to participants, to what degree have culturally responsive leadership practices been implemented in the district to address these issues?

My first question involved an analysis of discipline and SPED referral data. All schools in North Carolina are required to track discipline data involving office referrals, the type of infraction, and in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension placement. I reviewed the data reports in a way to determine patterns. I also identified the disproportionality represented in the data to determine if such disproportionality truly existed. I analyzed the data regarding African American males' placement in special education and African American males' removal from general education. Raw data does not contain spoken words, but the data itself speaks in a very loud uninterrupted voice. Identifying the patterns produced by the data helped me examine and

understand connections to existing research regarding the disproportionate suspensions and SPED placement for African American males in SJSD.

The qualitative nature of my study was addressed in question two, which provided the key school personnel with the opportunity to express and reflect on their experiences in regards to African American male students' suspensions and placement in special education. Disrespect, failure to comply, not following directions, and verbal outburst are some subjective behavior offenses. Subjective offenses allow school leaders the opportunity to make decisions based on their interpretation of the offense, their previous experiences with the student, and personal known or unknown bias. It was important to obtain the perspective of the school leader(s) that were making the decisions to complete a valid and productive case study.

Conducting my case study allowed me to discover similarities, patterns, and/or differences to discern future directions and recommendations for policy and practice. Data regarding African American males in public education informs us that traditional policies, curricula, instructional methods, and approaches to their social and emotional needs are not effective and lack equity. The last research question was the gateway to considering solutions for a better quality of life for the subjects involved in my study.

### **Sample Population**

The sample population in my case study included three district-level staff from the special education department, members from the elementary, middle, and high school level School Leadership Team (SLT), and special education staff or staff with special education experience from each level. My selection of participants was based on my knowledge of the discipline and special education processes at the school and district levels.



## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Interviews**

Interviews are very effective for qualitative research. Interviews in my study assisted me in accessing, understanding, and exploring my research subject's perceptions. The open-ended questions were designed to obtain information regarding behaviors, feelings, attitudes, knowledge, and opinions. Phone calls and face-to-face meetings are the traditional ways interviews are conducted; however, the current pandemic produced virtual meeting options and eliminated the opportunities for face-to-face interviews. I conducted virtual interviews with my participants. My research questions that involve asking "how" needed to be answered using an interview instead of a survey. I chose the interview method as an opportunity to engage, assess, and analyze my study subjects.

The participant interviews included three district-level special education administrators, school leadership team members from each school level, and school-level special education staff or staff with special education experience from each school. I conducted the interviews to address my study's topic in more depth. The district-level special education and district participants provided data regarding the disproportionality in special education placement and suspension. Interviews also addressed the special education disproportionality and the culturally responsive aspect of my study. My participant selection was flexible and did not require an interview specifically from a principal; rather, a member of the school's leadership team was sufficient. Table 1 displays the participants, their roles, and employment assignment level. I provide brief biographical information about each participant in Chapter IV.

**Table 1. Case Participant Interviews**

<b>Case 1 Elementary</b>	<b>Case 2 Middle School</b>	<b>Case 3 High School</b>
School Staff w/Spec Ed Experience	Special Ed School Staff	Special Ed School Staff
*Special Ed School Staff (vacant)		
School Leadership Team Member	School Leadership Team Member	School Leadership Team Member
Special Education Lead	Special Education Lead	Special Education Lead

Note. \* The school has a vacancy for the special education teacher position

In all the interviews I conducted, I used a scripted interview guide addressing African American males' placement in special education, African American males' removal from general education, and CRSL practices in SJSD. Copies of the interview guides are included in my Appendix. Due to the number of participants in my study each participant agreed to participate in one interview. Each interview lasted at least one hour. I transcribed the interviews to written form to analyze the participants responses.

### **Documents**

I examined the following documents: discipline data, SPED referral data, district-level policies and plans, School Improvement Plans (SIP), professional development schedules, and reports from the state's department of education. I identified patterns, subgroups, and trends by analyzing the documents in my study. The document data was also used to guide the creation of my interview questions, approach to research, and interpretation of the results. Various sources of document data were essential in conducting my case study research. In 2006, Yin stated, "good case studies benefit from multiple sources of evidence" (p. 115).

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews that I conducted during my study provided me with the opportunity to complete qualitative data analysis. First, I transcribed the interview results from the virtual interviews into written form. Afterward, I coded the transcripts in order to identify themes. Baxter and Jack (2008) discovered that coding contributed to the consistency and dependability of the findings generated at the analysis stage. I utilized the themes that emerged, along with my findings from analyzing documents in Saint John's School District (SJSD), to answer my research questions, provide recommendations for practice, and provide recommendations for future research.

I examined the case of how the small SJSD engaged with African American male students in regard to special education placement and disciplinary practices; therefore, in reporting my findings I described the district and provided some details of each individual school that I studied within the district. I utilized data from the interviews to describe the three schools that were part of the case study district, as well as quantitative data in the form of placement and suspension rates, data reports, and various other data from district documents.

I understood that I was not able to tell the whole entire story of each school; therefore, using critical and key events allowed me to remain aligned with the scope of focus of my study. I constructed tables to provide visuals in relation to my problem. I created the word tables to display the special education placement data regarding race and behavior infraction data in SJSD. I used additional data from the state's department of education to create the tables and to display the disproportionality produced by placing African American male students in special education and suspending African American males after being diagnosed with a disability in SJSD.

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness in my case study I used multiple sources of evidence, as per Yin (2009). I utilized a variety of documents and interviews. Yin (2009) advised, “You should immediately note that no single source has a complete advantage over all the others. In fact, the various sources are highly complementary, and a good case study will therefore want to use as many sources as possible” (p. 164). I maximized my sources of evidence using the following techniques provided by Yin (2009):

1. I triangulated multiple sources of evidence;
2. I created a study database to organize and document the data collected; and
3. I maintained a chain of evidence for reliability. Triangulation of multiple sources of data strengthened the validity of my study and its outcomes.

## **Limitations**

All studies have limitations, and my limitations were based on the scope of my study. I chose to conduct a case study of a small school district with a high population of African American students and a substantial number of African American males. Therefore, my findings are not generalizable. Conducting my study in a medium to large district would yield more opportunities for interviews and data collection. Another possible limitation of my study was that I focused solely on the experiences of African American male students with disabilities and my initial literature review indicates a similar unjust experience for African American females.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed my research methods. I explained why I used the case study methodology for my study. Additionally, I reviewed my pilot study and focused on what I learned to further my data collection for my case study. My research questions provided a

mechanism for collecting the necessary data to conduct my case study. I also discussed and detailed the setting, sample population, data collection methods, and data analysis. I concluded the chapter with an explanation of how I maintained trustworthiness and the limitations of my study.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this Chapter, I introduce my findings regarding practices in the Saint John's School District (SJSD) as well as each of the three schools I studied in that district. My study is designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are current data in the district around suspensions and special education placement for African American male students?
2. How do key personnel in the district describe their experiences in regard to African American male students' suspensions and placement in special education?
3. According to participants, to what degree have culturally responsive leadership practices been implemented in the district to address these issues?

To address these research questions, I conducted interviews and asked questions to understand participants' perceptions of the district's and their schools' practices in regard to placement in special education for African American males as well as removal of African American males from their general education placement with their nondisabled peers for behavior incidents. I also asked them about their familiarity with Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) as a support option. In addition to my interviews, I analyzed multiple sources of special education data and policy from the state's department of education, Saint John's School District, and the schools located in Saint John's.

In this chapter, I start by providing a description of the setting and profiles of the study participants. I then discuss special education operations in the Saint John's School District before describing how special education proceeds in the three schools. I conclude the chapter by describing the main themes that emerged from my study.

## Setting

The Saint John's School District (SJSD) is a city district located in the Eastern part of the United States consisting of seven schools. The district is a Title 1 city district located in a county district that contains one other city system as well as the county system. The student population is 3,161 students consisting of the following racial backgrounds: Asian 5%, White 23%, Black 29%, Hispanic 35%, and two or more races 8%. Per the 2019-20 statistics provided by the National Center for Education Statistics the district is comprised of 3,134 students, 201.95 teachers, and around 408 students in special education.

### School Sites

The district has 4 elementary schools. I studied **Southside Elementary School (SES)** (a pseudonym) and it consisted of grades 1-5 and had over 340 students enrolled based on 2019-2020 data. The elementary school is a Title 1 school with 29 teachers and the following student demographics: 32% Hispanic, 32% African American, 27% White, 8% two or more races, and 1% Asian.

**Eastview Middle School (EMS)** (a pseudonym) is the only middle school in the district that serves grades 6-8 and 786 students based on the school's 2019-2020 profile. EMS is classified as Title I and has 45 certified staff members. The student demographics include 35% Hispanic, 32% African American, 18% White, 9% two or more races, 5% Asian, and 0.3% Pacific Islander.

**Village High School (VHS)** (a pseudonym) is the only high school in the district that serves grades 9-12; it has a student enrollment of 808 students. The school's profile website lists 54 classroom teachers, but it is also important to note that the staff also consists of several student support services staff. The high school is not considered a Title I school despite having

100% free and reduced lunch students. The student demographics include 38% Hispanic, 31% African American, 20% White, and 11% other.

## **Participant Profiles**

### **District Level Personnel**

#### ***Charlotte***

The District Elementary Special Education Lead is a White female, and she has 14 years of experience working in special education. Charlotte started as a substitute teacher, then worked as a teacher assistant, later becoming a special education teacher, and finally leading to her current position. Charlotte's duties include overseeing federal paperwork, ensuring special education placements are compliant with guidelines and supporting school staff with providing special education services for the district's elementary schools. Her teaching experience is on the secondary level. During her secondary experience, Charlotte was a special education case manager. She collaborated with students, guidance staff, and regular education teachers to select the student's pathway to a diploma. Charlotte gained all of her experience working in special education at Village High School in Saint John's School District. She has been in current her current position for less than one full school year. Charlotte is known for her calm demeanor and gentle nature, and she tries her best to avoid conflict. She is assertive when needed and very good with utilizing technology and education.

#### ***Lois***

The District Middle School Special Education Lead is a 23-year veteran educator with all years being in special education. Lois is a Black female, and she is a former public separate school teacher, self-contained special education teacher, and district-level program support specialist. Lois has previous experience working for a large- and middle-sized school district.



She serves on various community committees for special needs individuals. Lois is very passionate about working with students with disabilities and making sure that they are receiving FAPE. She is currently in her first year in this role in the district, but she has previous experience in a different district. Most of Lois's experience involved working with students with intellectual disabilities. She was responsible for teaching her students daily living and life skills. Lois is eager to learn in her new role, evidenced by her comment on the ramifications of disproportionality when she stated, "I am learning under my new director and a series of training events that I am in."

***Vernon***

The District High School Special Education Lead is a 15-year veteran in education. Vernon is a Black male and former regular education teacher as well as a special education teacher. He has experience working with students with disabilities on the elementary level as well as the high school level. He also has worked in one other school system outside of SJDS. Vernon's current role is a new grant-funded position in SJSD. Vernon previously worked as a special education teacher at an elementary school in SJSD. He stated that he transferred to the elementary level to try and get ahead of the problem facing students with disabilities. Vernon also has previous experience as a special education teacher and a regular education teacher at Village High School in SJSD. His success in special education at the high school level led to his regular education classes containing a large number of special education students; "they use to load me up" was his response to his class makeup.

## **Southside Elementary School (SES) Personnel**

### ***Brenda***

The Elementary School Level Staff (Staff) member is a Black female and recent retiree with 25 years of experience as a veteran teacher. Brenda started as a first- through the fifth-grade classroom teacher. Math Specialist, District Digital Facilitator, and Multi Classroom Leader are also some of the previous positions held by this staff member. Brenda's experience in special education is correlated with her experience in collaborating and training new staff, including special education staff. The school currently has a vacancy for a special education teacher. Brenda was also a member of the school's response to the intervention team that made referrals to special education. Her reputation for being able to handle students with behavior issues often led to her being assigned students with severe issues, using her classroom as a removal location, and being pulled away from her class to assist others. Brenda has a special connection with African American males because she has sons. Brenda has a lot of power and influence amongst the staff in SES. All of her teaching experience occurred at SJSD, and she received several awards over the years.

### ***Mary***

The Elementary School Leadership Team (SLT) member is a Black female and 28-year veteran in education, with most of her experience being done on the administrative level. Mary has experience as an Assistant Principal and Principal at the middle and elementary levels. She is the current principal of the elementary school and has served in that capacity for several years. Most of Mary's school administrator experience occurred in SJSD. Her initial success in the elementary setting led to her later becoming the principal at Eastview Middle School for several years. Mary stated, "I learned a lesson or two at middle school," explaining her preference to

work on the elementary level. She has a reputation in her building for going the extra mile for students and especially her students who experience behavior, academic, and social issues.

### **Eastview Middle School (EMS) Personnel**

#### ***Willie***

A Middle School Level Staff, Willie is a Black male and a 14-year veteran working with behavior students in traditional and alternative settings. He is a member of the school's special education department and an alternative teacher. Willie worked with African American males with disabilities in the middle and high school alternative education program. He also has previous experience as an In-School Suspension (ISS) staff member and coaching athletics. Willie grew up in a community similar to the students in SJSD, and he can relate to the plight of African American male students. He is able to mentor his student on the importance of getting an education first and not depending on athletics to make a living. Willie is an unofficial mentor to several young men in Eastview Middle School. He is able to reach several students that others deem unreachable.

#### ***John***

The Middle School-School Improvement Team (SLT) member is a Black male and a 15-year veteran. John is currently on the school's leadership team and serves as the middle school representative for specialty area courses. He has classroom experience with working with African American males with disabilities as well as being a member of the decision-making body that implements policies that affect African American males with disabilities. He also has previous experience in coaching athletics. He previously taught in a co-teach environment with a special education teacher. John utilized his position as a coach to establish relationships with his

male students. John began his career at SJSD, but he left for a few years and recently returned. John is a quiet person, but he teaches with passion. He has a genuine love for students.

### **Village High School (VHS) Personnel**

#### ***Bobby***

The High School Level Staff is a Black male certified special education teacher with several years of experience as a career exploration teacher. Bobby is a 15-year veteran in education and recently accepted an administrative position in a different district. He started as a teacher assistant in special education and has served as a resource teacher prior to teaching in the career exploration field. Bobby began his career at SJSD working with students with behavior issues and served in the alternative education program. During his tenure working in the alternative program, he experienced several classes made up mostly of African American males. Bobby is nervous and excited about the opportunity to work on the administrative level. He stated several times, “I think I am, but I do not know.”

#### ***Katherine***

The High School Level School Leadership Team (SLT) member is a Black female and a 25-year veteran in education. Katherine has experience on the elementary, middle, and high school levels; however, her administrative experience is on the secondary level. The SLT is in the process of being transferred to another school in the district as the lead administrator. Katherine has spent her entire career at SJSD, and she has won several district-level and school-level awards for teaching. She has assistant principal experience at the middle and high school levels. During her tenure at Village High School, she served as the only female member of the administrative team. She is known for her energetic personality and ability to engage in deep conversation with anyone. Katherine is excited about her up-and-coming opportunity to lead her

own school and implement her own programs “you know, when you are an AP, you are under the mercy of the principal.” Katherine received culturally responsive training during the pursuit of her administration license.

### **Special Education Data and Policy at the District Level**

Suspension data from the state’s department of instruction for the district from the 2018-2019 school year indicates that 350 students in the district were responsible for 745 behavior incidents resulting in over 1,740 removal days in the form of In-School Suspension (ISS) or Out of School Suspension (OSS). Two hundred fifty-four students during 2019-2020 committed over 340 incidents resulting in over 900 days of removals. Table 2 and Table 3 display the incidents committed and suspension data from 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 for the three largest ethnic groups in SJSJSD. It also displays the number of incidents committed by race, the number of incidents committed by nondisabled students, and the number of incidents committed by students with disabilities. It is important to note that during the 2019-2020 school year, the system closed its buildings to students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 2. 2018-2019 SJSJSD Suspension Data**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Number of Incidents Non-Disabled Students</b>	<b>Number of Incidents Students With Disabilities</b>
<b>Black</b>	278	115
<b>Hispanic</b>	105	13
<b>White</b>	84	42

**Table 3. 2019-2020 SJSJSD Suspension Data**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Number of Incidents Non-Disabled Students</b>	<b>Number of Incidents Students With Disabilities</b>
<b>Black</b>	74	21
<b>Hispanic</b>	31	3
<b>White</b>	25	2

In terms of policies, SJSD has a district code of conduct policy that identifies the infraction, suggests the consequence, and enforcement of the consequence based on the student's grade level. The SJSD website promotes the idea that it is an excellent and equitable school district. The district has a clear and published mission and vision statement embracing diversity. SJSD also has a strategic plan to guide the focus of the district from 2019 to 2024. Equity, diversity, innovation, and excellence are some of the core values emphasized. However, there is no current equity policy or plan for the district. The district's website includes contact information for community agencies for outreach assistance. The special education website lists personnel and contact information, but it does not list the rights afforded to students and families, along with a formal procedure for contacting staff or submitting a complaint for perceived violations.

### **Participant Perceptions of Special Education Practices in Saint John's School District**

#### ***African American Males' Placement in Special Education***

The participants who worked at the district level are aware of the policies that guide special education practice. They are familiar with the policy for the disproportionate placement of students of certain races in special education. However, there is a need for the participants to expand their knowledge regarding the ramifications of noncompliance with the policy. Charlotte, the District Elementary Special Education Lead, is responsible for providing special education support to elementary teachers and building-level administrators. She defines disproportionality as "Placing kids in special education. Certain kids, a certain race of certain kids being represented more in one category versus another." Lois, the District Middle School Special Education Lead, is a 23-year veteran assigned to providing special education support to middle school teachers and building-level administrators; she knew a general definition of the concept.

She expanded and addressed her unfamiliarity regarding the ramifications of violating the policy.

“No, I am not. Prior to this interview today, however, I have just signed up for a series of training, webinars, and trainings, so I don’t have that knowledge yet, but I’m hoping to get that.”

Vernon, as District High School Special Education Lead, provides related service support for students with disabilities, but he was also familiar with disproportionate placements.

### ***African American Males’ Removals from General Education***

Students with disabilities in Saint John’s are afforded safeguard protections from being suspended from school because of their disability. The district’s special education staff is tasked with knowing the policy and supporting their assigned schools with counting the removal days and when to initiate a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR). Charlotte, the Elementary Lead, described the MDR process and suspensions as follows:

So, after a student has had ISS or OSS for 10 days, then you would have to meet, have an IEP meeting. The administrator would have to send the invitation or the prior written notice out to the parent and inform them of the manifestation meeting. And the team would get together. They would go through the situation that happened. If the student had a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). The BIP was to be addressed and changed if it’s needed, if it’s not working, and depending on what the disability it is, determine if whatever the infraction was based on the disability.

Lois described her perception of how suspensions are held after the MDR and students have exceeded their 10 suspension days.

I think people scramble then, you know, when you got people holding you to it, you know, kind of like such as myself in the position that I am and my director, too, I think

that we bring it to their knowledge and then, you know, they scramble to try to do what they need to do at that point.

Vernon, the High School Lead, utilized examples to describe his understanding of the MDR process as follows:

Yeah, well, I understand that if a student who has a disability, for example, if the student has a behavioral goal in their IEP and they get in a fight, and it leads to a suspension, the first thing we need to do is see if that fight has anything to do with their disability or if it's skipping or whatever it may be. We need to see if that is a manifestation of their disability. If it is, then we have to go down a different path. Instead of suspending, we have to make sure that we're doing it in compliance with regulations.

### ***Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework***

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) focuses on how school leaders can effectively serve minoritized students that have been historically marginalized in school and society (Khalifa, 2018). The district level participants understood the term culture. They were unfamiliar with CRSL, but they were able to apply their leadership experience to the four CRSL tenets.

**Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors.** CRSL require leaders to reflect critically on their leadership behaviors. Charlotte critically self-reflected and gave a general answer focusing on generalities, noting, "So that's an easy thing for me because I love diversity. So, I'm open to everyone that's not like me and things like their heritage. Their backgrounds. The things that that they do in their culture." Lois recalled an experience on the student level and being able to communicate effectively with a student with a language barrier. The High School Special Education Lead, Vernon, reflected on past classroom practices:



I do that all the time in my classes because that's my training. Maybe I need to go slower. Maybe I need to have more visuals in the classroom. Maybe I need to use different methods of getting the same point across and not saying, okay, you need to read this and answer these questions. Some people may not be able to read that effectively, but you've got to use visuals and different strategies depending on what you have in your classroom.

The district-level participants self-reflected on a situation in which they took responsibility for something that was offensive to a recipient and how they handled the situation. Charlotte applied the self-prescribed label of “being a people pleaser” and not wanting to offend anyone. Lois, the Middle School Special Ed Lead, recalled a situation where she was the person that was offended and her need to advocate for their student’s rights. Vernon recalled losing his temper with a student and the student not being at fault. He expressed the need to apologize to the student and let them know that he (Vernon) was in the wrong and tomorrow would start a brand-new day.

**Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers.** Leaders are responsible for providing opportunities to grow staff to become culturally responsive. Charlotte, the District Elementary Special Education Lead, expressed the need to acknowledge and learn from diversity. She stated that “We acknowledge that we’re all different, and we all have a lot that we can bring to our diversity among each other and that there's a value that we can learn from that.” Lois expressed the need for leaders to self-reflect on themselves. There was no definite suggestion given by Lois. Vernon expressed the need to incorporate diversity and inclusion into the curriculum as teaching moments.

I guess with the students, we could do that in like what we have our—it needs to be something that we can build into our lessons. Maybe you can take 5 minutes or 10

minutes prior to starting your class and talk about one of these important issues like diversity. What is diversity defined? It helps students to think about it, maybe ask questions about it or inclusion. How can I be in? How can we work? Including when we say inclusion, we can look at that from a special ed perspective, but we can also look at it from a different perspective, like how can we get more students in the chorus or in the band and social justice. It's all about everybody being treated equal, and we know right now that's not happening.

**Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment.** Participants described a situation where they used their multicultural skills to solve a problem. Lois recalled helping a student with a language barrier “I use the Google Translate to try to be able to at least understand what's going on with the situation that I might need if it's coming from a student who is an English language learner and just research.” Vernon, the Special Education Lead, recalled a situation with an African American male in his classroom and how he made a home visit to express concern. Vernon's response also focuses on building relationships.

The only thing I can think of is a time when a student was having issues, and it was an African-American male student. He was having issues in the classroom. I don't know if he was. I don't think he was special ed, but I had to go to his grandmother's house and talk to her about helping me to deal with the issue he was having in my class. That's something I tell him. I said, Listen, I'll go knock on your door.

Charlotte failed to describe a scenario, explaining, “I don't know if I can think of an actual situation, but I think it's just in my everyday life.”

**Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts.** The district-level staff was unable to identify any district-level CRSL programs for students with disabilities. Charlotte

named the School Improvement Team (SIT) and parent committees, but she also stated that, hopefully, the groups are diverse. Lois also stated that she was unfamiliar with any practices available for students with disabilities. Vernon also was not able to reflect on any current programs at the district level; however, he made a statement regarding the lack of implementation of already mandated programs that are not currently in place at the district level.

I just don't think we have many of those in place. One of the problems is that we haven't had a MTSS, which ought to be a team that's involved in a lot of these issues when it comes to these cultural practices, placement, and suspensions. You have kids that are not going through the same thing. But we need to have a team that's working together in the district and that's something we just we haven't had here, but now we're in the process of implementing it.

### ***Summary***

The SJSD's special education department is operating under new leadership and new personnel. The district level personnel have been trained in policy and gaining an understanding of the roles to support the school level staff. Black students are being removed from school at higher rates than the other two majority races Hispanic and White. The district has a code of conduct policy that outlines the punishment for the infraction committed. The policy also outlines the offenses that constitute a referral to law enforcement and the referrals can occur as early as elementary school. The district participants were familiar with the term culture, but they lacked the knowledge about Culturally Responsive School Leadership.

### **School 1: Southside Elementary School**

In presenting the findings for Southside Elementary School (SES), I analyze special education data at the school and describe the results of my interviews with participants.

## **Special Education Data and Policies at SES**

In this section, I analyze the following documents for Southside Elementary School: special education enrollment and suspension data, mission and vision statements, school improvement plan, student code of conduct policy, and the website. The district has four elementary schools. Southside Elementary School had over 340 students enrolled based on 2019-2020 data. The elementary school is a Title I school with 29 teachers and the following student demographics: 32% Hispanic, 32% African American, 27% White, 8% two or more races, and 1% Asian. There are around 43 students with disabilities enrolled at SES. Based on data provided by the state's department of instruction during the 2018-2019 school year, SES had 56 Black students enrolled and 13 of the 56 were students with disabilities. There were no data available regarding the number of Black males receiving special education. Suspension data from the same year indicated that Black students with disabilities were the only students with disabilities that experienced a removal in SES. Black students without disabilities in SES faced the most removals.

The school's mission and vision statement along with the School's Improvement Plan (SIP) include wording for embracing culture and diversity. The SIP includes a goal for focusing on reducing the achievement gap between Hispanic and Black students in reading scores. There was no official professional development plan available for the school. SES website lists the name and website link for the special education staff; however, there is no informational page for parents with questions and concerns. SES utilizes the code of conduct established by the district as guidance for making behavior decisions.

## **Participant Perceptions of Special Education Practices at SES**

### ***African American Males' Placement in Special Education***

All participants in this school agreed that African American males are disproportionately placed in special education programs early in their public education experience. Brenda recalled a referral to the School's Leadership Team and the difficulty with getting the student placed in special education due to policy. Brenda's experience involved a conflict between meeting the students' needs and complying with policy, stating, "You know you could tell there was a disability, but the staff, was refusing to place him because of disproportionately, and they were afraid there'll be some kind of ramifications if we were to place this child, he needed help." Policy intended to protect students with disabilities is also serving as a barrier to the students in SES receiving a Free Public Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Mary from the SLT Team recalled placing an African American male in special education as early as Pre-Kindergarten "He was with us for two years. Pre-K and made gains his kindergarten year. So, yes, he was successful. I do know that when he went to first grade, that was a completely different experience. And now he has a completely different placement." It is important to note that students do not participate in standardized testing until the third grade, and the referral in Mary's experience was a result of behavior issues. Charlotte, the District Elementary Special Education Lead, recalled placing a second-grade African American male:

So last year we had a student who is in the second grade that was in the referral process. There were behaviors in the classroom. The parent, initially or eventually decided that she wanted to have testing just to see if they could kind of figure out what was going on or what could help him. And the area that the student qualified under was Autism and Emotionally Disabled.

Based on the participants' experiences in SES placing African American males in special education did not positively impact their social skills or social interactions. Brenda stated that "it was part of the same," implying that there was no change in her student's social skills and interactions. Mary based her answer on the performance of the staff, explaining, "that's hard to say. Because I think it can be positive with the right people involved. I've seen kids exit special education, which is awesome." Mary's statement regarding exiting special education is rare, and placing students as early as Pre-K creates a label that follows the student for the remainder of their public education experience.

Charlotte from the district staff who was also the person with the most special education experience reflected on the student mentioned earlier and expressed the only definite answer.

I think it had a negative effect. He did not like to be pulled out and come out of the classroom for his service times. Nor did he like anyone in there. Because he kind of felt like none of the other kids had that, so he felt like he was kind of being pointed out in the classroom and he didn't like that.

There is a general understanding of the term disproportionality in SES. However, the school personnel was unable to connect disproportionality to special education policy without assistance. Brenda from the school staff stated that disproportionality involved "a higher rate than one" and was not familiar with the policy relating to special education and the actual ramifications. Mary from the school's leadership explained the definition by stating, "when you have a particular group that exceeds another or when you're looking at your total population. And those numbers are disproportionate." Mary also expressed neither knowledge of the exact policy nor its ramifications. The responses from the school personnel were different from the district's staff member Charlotte. She defined the term as "placing certain kids, certain race of

certain kids being represented more in one category versus another.” There is a noted gap between the district participant’s knowledge and the knowledge of the school-level participants regarding disproportionality in special education.

African American males in SES face similar national trends regarding being disproportionately referred to special education versus advanced learning programs. “Most students on my level are referred to the special ed program versus the AIG program” was expressed by Brenda the school level staff who had 25 years of elementary level experience. Mary the SLT member simply stated “Yes, that’s significant.” Mary’s response implies that there was a large gap in SES for the number of African American males being referred to special education versus advanced learning programs.

#### ***African American Males’ Removal from General Education***

Brenda, the staff member, did not elaborate but stated that she lacked knowledge of the 10-day suspension policy: “I’m not familiar with a 10th suspension day.” Mary, the SLT member, knew that the Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) policy would need to be applied prior to the tenth day; however, there was uncertainty as to what would happen if suspensions exceeded 10 days. The MDR process involves determining if a student’s behavior is a result of their disability. Mary’s experience with suspensions occurred mostly at the secondary level. It is important to note once again that Charlotte, the District Elementary Special Education Lead was familiar with the process prior to 10 days as well as the procedures for suspensions beyond 10 days.

Subjective behavior infractions are based on the perception of the person observing the behavior. Being defiant, disrespectful, and refusals are some subjective behaviors. African American males with disabilities at SES are referred to the office disproportionately for

subjective behavior infractions listed in the district's code of conduct policy for students that justify removals. Brenda previously expressed no experience with suspensions on the elementary level; however, she does have experiences with African American males and office referrals. Being defiant, talking back, classroom disruptions, and sleeping in class are some of the behaviors observed by her that results in office referrals for African American males at the secondary level. Mary listed removals for being off task and being disrespectful as the main two areas. Charlotte observed removals for refusals and outburst.

African American males with disabilities in SES are not always referred to the office for behavior incidents. Brenda expressed a need to build a relationship and find out what is going on with the student.

Well you know the biggest thing we've heard it for years is relationships. We Need to find out, you know what is he calling out for? Listen to the child! Listen to what he's saying, he or she is saying, Find out! You when know one of those occurrences are happening. There could be a conflict between the child and the teacher, but what I normally do is try to just listen! Listen to the child.

Mary also expressed the importance of building relationships but expressed her thought in terms of the "teacher connection piece." Emphasis was also placed on determining the reason and cause of the behavior in order to be effective in solving the student's issue. Charlotte, the District Elementary Special Education Lead, reflected on her previous experience as a classroom teacher and how she took the time to get to know the kids and identify potential triggers.

So, in the past with my caseload when I was a teacher. I felt it important to get to know my kids, to understand what makes them tick or what will set them off and let them understand that I am there for them. I care for them and I believe in them. And so there



would be times where if they're starting to escalate, the teacher would know or even the student would know to come and find me and we would walk and talk it out.

Participants at SES perceive that removals have a negative impact on improving behaviors and academic performance for SWD. Brenda the Staff member expressed that the removals have no impact on improving the student's behavior and it often leads to behaviors getting worst because students learn to do certain things to be removed from class. When asked about the impact removals have on the student's academic performance Brenda stated "Well, it's not a good thing, because they're not in class. They're not getting any instructions." Mary from the SLT explained her thoughts around focusing on the need to determine the function of the behavior and excess removals; therefore, not focusing on the actual effectiveness of the school-based removal programs. Charlotte from the district perception is that the programs are not effective and serve as a reward to the student by allowing them to go home and avoid educational opportunities. Removal programs cause the students to miss valuable instruction that leads to them failing behind and becoming frustrated. SES does not have an In-School Suspension program, so they develop strategies to avoid placing students in Out of School Suspension.

Brenda and Mary both indicate that there are currently no programs available in their school to support students with known behavior issues. Charlotte the District Elementary Special Education Lead assigned to SES mentioned a district behavior support program for students with disabilities that is unfamiliar to the school's staff.

We have the PRC 29 specialist who also is an individual that works with them where they go out and work with any of our kids that have a BIP. And try to work with the teachers to figure out strategies they can use within the classroom.

### ***Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework***

SES meets the needs and requirements for implementing CRSL practices, but participants are unfamiliar with the concept. The response from the participants did not produce a clear understanding of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). Brenda and Mary expressed a definition relating to the student's culture, but there was no mention of the four components of the framework. I provided both of the participants with an official definition to guide our discussion and the definition was new to all of them. Both of the participants at SES were able to apply their experiences to the CRSL tenets regardless of their knowledge the actual tenets.

**Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors.** Even though the participants in this study were unfamiliar with the CRSL framework, they were able to reflect on their leadership behaviors. Brenda recalled a time that she had to adapt her style or decision to work effectively with others that are different from her. She stated, "our staff is not diverse, and a lot of times I do have to adapt to make the transitions easier to get the teachers on board, and I have to do a lot of adapting because they don't understand." Mary, the SLT member, recalled,

I had to help teachers understand that because I may live in a certain area or be a certain age doesn't mean that you don't want the best for your child. So, think about maybe all those different aspects and even thinking about, like what a parent's job may be. I've had to risk previously thinking about interventions that they could possibly do for kids in addition to other ways that they can communicate with parents and what communication actually is.

Both participants self-reflecting on a situation that they took responsibility for something that was offensive to a recipient and how they handled the situation. Brenda recalled a situation when a special education student was placed in her classroom and the parent visited frequently

causing the student to act out. Brenda made the decision to remove the parent in order to make a connection with the student and she informed the main office of her decision. The end result is that the student adapted and the parent understood that their removal was in the best interest of the student. Mary did not elaborate much. Her focus was placed on her being confident in her decision making regardless of her limited amount of access to materials at the time of her decision and providing the best answer at the time and living with it.

**Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers.** The CRSL framework requires that leaders develop culturally responsive teachers and staff. At SES in order to motivate and engage students, faculty and/or staff in learning varied perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and social justice Brenda indicated the need to give the individuals voices to determine what they would like to learn. Her suggestions include using surveys to assess staffs need and interest in training opportunities. Mary the SLT member expressed the need to be transparent and encourage staff to tell their story, and listen to the stories of others. She expressed the need for students to hear stories from people in their building that have overcome challenges and obstacles, explaining, “You want people who look like you and just everybody wants people who look like them.”

**Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment.** Participants described a situation when they used their multicultural skills to solve a problem. The Brenda recalled a situation involving a student and teacher.

There was an African American girl. She kept acting out, and no one couldn't figure out why. I found out that the teacher kept touching her head. The teacher kept saying, Oh, you have so nice (touching her) hair. It was a White teacher, and I had to explain to her that that's something that you do not do. You do not put your hands in a Black person head. She didn't know, she had no idea. She stopped after that, and then her and the

student they found a better relationship. She just didn't know. She looked at what she was doing as being innocent, and I told her, "No, you cannot do that."

Mary described experiences with having the ability to communicate with parents to solve problems. She talked about a situation in which a student went home and informed his parent that someone urinated on his shoe and when the parent called the teacher, she was not satisfied with the answer given. Mary had to calm the parent down and identify that the teacher lacked the cultural experience to communicate with the parent.

**Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts.** SES staff failed to identify any culturally responsive practices and programs in their school available for students with disabilities. Brenda mentioned that the school is in the first year of applying a culturally themed based curriculum and programs in the school; however, the effectiveness would not be determined until the following year. Mary chose to focus on previous trainings that the district offered and she emphasized that the current training was not as good as past training sessions. All of the participants expressed a common belief to their knowledge that there are currently no practices in place to specifically address special education placements and suspensions for African American males with disabilities.

### ***Summary***

Black students with disabilities were the only students suspended at SES during 2018-2019. The data was not available to track the sex of students that were suspended. SES has identified an opportunity gap for Black and Hispanic students evidenced by their School Improvement Plan. African American males face placement in special education as early as pre-kindergarten. There is a gap in knowledge between the elementary district special education lead and the school staff. The staff at SES engage in practices to avoid sending students to the office

for behavior referrals that results in a removal. There is no In School Suspension program at SES. The participants at SES were not familiar with the CRSL process; however, they were unknowingly engaging in CRSL practices.

### **School 2: Eastview Middle School**

In presenting the data for Eastview Middle School (EMS), I start by analyzing special data and policies at the school. I then describe the results of my interviews with participants.

#### **Special Education Data and Policies at EMS**

In this section, I analyze the following documents for Eastview Middle School: special education enrollment and suspension data, mission and vision statements, school improvement plan, and the website. EMS is the only middle school in the district and it serves grades 6-8 and over 750 students based on the school's profile. The middle school is classified as Title 1 and has 45 certified staff members. The student demographics include: 35% Hispanic, 32% African American, 18% White, 9% two or more races, 5% Asian, and 0.3% Pacific Islander. Over 90 students are in the special education program at EMS.

Suspension and removal data indicate in 2018-2019 nondisabled Black students at EMS accounted for 202 behavior incidents and Black students with disabilities committed 73 incidents. Nondisabled Hispanic students at EMS account for 35 incidents and Hispanic students with disabilities accounted for 8 behavior incidents. Nondisabled White students committed 60 incidents and White students with disabilities accounted for 21 incidents. Black students were disproportionately removed from EMS when compared to the students from other two dominant races at EMS.

The vision statement for EMS is brief but it addressed serving all students. The mission statement lacked inclusive and equitable wording for social justice rights for all students. The

SIP includes a goal for decreasing the number of students assigned to ISS and OSS. There is no official professional development plan for the school. The EMS website lists the name and website link for the special education staff; however, there is no informational page for parents with questions and concerns. EMS utilizes the code of conduct established by the district as guidance for making behavior decisions.

## **Participant Perception of Special Education Practices at EMS**

### ***African American Males' Placement in Special Education***

African American males at EMS are placed in special education prior to attending EMS, but they remain in the program based on special education policy. Willie stated “On the Middle school level, we do not see a lot of placement requests, we're usually involved with the reevaluation part.” John the SLT member recalled an African American male that participated in athletics, but displayed behavior issue that caused concern. Lois the Special Ed Lead expressed no experience with initial placements.

Well, I can't, no. I have not because I've always been in secondary. So, the students that I had during my time has been as a classroom teacher and have already been identified. I have had other students that transferred in during that time that we had made special education.

The special education school and district staff at EMS perceive placing African American males in special education as negatively impacting the student's social skills and social interactions. Willie stated “I would say negative, because you know you are placed in that placement, and sometimes that can be looked at as negative, you know.” John from the school's leadership perspective noted that “I think that they actually improved and made him a better individual.” Lois's experience was similar to Willie's.

Some of the kids that I have known who have been placed and had been placed in special education, and particularly the program that I was in. They would have been in and I would say a negative fit because they did not want anybody to know.

Willie and John were not familiar with the term disproportionality; therefore, they were unaware if disproportionality was occurring intentionally or unintentionally at EMS. I provided them both with a definition in order to engage in a discussion. Lois the District Middle School Special Education Lead was familiar with the concept and stated “So it basically means what I just kind of said about being overrepresented in a particular disability area. And just basically the high numbers.” The district staff member is familiar with the policy for disproportional placements, but the school staff lacks the knowledge and they are the individuals engaged in practice.

All participants perceive that African American males in EMS are disproportionately referred to special education versus being placed in advanced learning programs. Willie reflected and recalled his experience as being rare.

In my experience the most that I see African American males are mostly placed in the Special Education Department. It is very seldom that I see African American males in AIG. If it is, it's a special, a special situation.

John stated “I rarely see those students being referred to AIG programs, they are more referred to programs like special education.” Lois voiced a disclaimer that her response was based on her personal experience, noting “I can say that there is a very high overrepresentation of Black males placed in the Special Ed versus AIG, not because I sat down and study stuff. It's just because through keen observation.”

### *African American Males' Removal from General Education*

Willie and John from EMS are familiar with the suspension policy and suspending students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have safeguard protections afforded to them around the tenth removal. Willie stated “students are suspended prior to 10 days and a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) must be done after 10 days.” John expressed the need to conduct the MDR prior to the tenth removal “the MDR is held.”

The district’s student conduct policy disproportionately removes African American males with disabilities from their regular educational placement at EMS. Willie stated that African American males are removed for fighting, cursing, horseplay, and disrespect. John stated “many times they are referred because they are bigger.” Lois recalled students being vocal, aggressive, and unable to communicate effectively as reasons for removals.

African American males with disabilities at EMS are not referred to the office for every behavior incident. Willie described his efforts to get students to accept responsibility for their actions. “I try to make them understand the decisions they make, you know, will lead to consequences. I try to build relationships with guys to make them understand that.” John described trying to relate to the students’ culture (music, television shows, and sports) and showing the students that the adult can relate to their situation. Lois also expressed the importance of building relationships.

Plain and simple. I just think that just develop the relationship and rapport with the students, even though there might be some acts, actions that they may have committed that may have probably warrant sending to ISS or whatever. I develop a classroom processes and procedures within our classroom that. Try to work with the kids and if they had plans, BIPs, or whatever, follow those. And I just work with the kids and just to have



that relationship with them so many times it can something that we could just talk it out or just give them time to just go through whatever they're going through and just let them vent or whatever they have and then just approach it later.

All of the participants at EMS expressed the importance of building relationships with students in order to deal with them when they are experiencing a behavior crisis. Once students with disabilities are referred to the office, they face the consequences outlined in the code of conduct policy resulting in a removal.

Removals at EMS do not positively impact improving behaviors and the academic performance for African American males with disabilities. Willie indicated that the behaviors often stay the same. John stated that “it’s hard to say, in my area they tend to get worst some time.” Lois stated, “Oh Lord, stay the same. Slash gets worse.” There is a noted concern with the students getting behind in class due to the removals.

Willie and John were able to identify programs in EMS for students with known behavior issues. Willie mentioned the PRC 29 program for disabled students with known behavior issues “PRC 29. It's a behavioral support program in our school system that helps kids who we target who have behavior issues.” The PRC 29 program is criteria based and intended to provide behavior support to special education students with severe behaviors. John stated “Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) is starting and also learning labs. Learning labs are also one of the biggest programs that we use for some of those students.” The MTSS program at EMS is in the implementation phase.

### ***Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework***

EMS meets the needs and requirements for implementing CRSL practices, but participants are unfamiliar with the concept. All participants at EMS was provided with a

definition for CRSL. There was no familiarity with the four tenets of the framework, but participants stated that they understood the concept after I provided them with a summary.

**Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors.** CRSL requires leaders to self-reflect on their leadership behaviors. The participants at EMS were not familiar with the official process; however, they were able to reflect on their behaviors as leaders. The participants at EMS recalled a time that they had to adapt their style or decision making to work effectively with people that were different from them. Willie recalled working in an alternative setting with a staff from a different culture.

When I first started working in alternative learning with behavior kids, I was working with someone who, we were not on the same page about how we deal with the kids. So, I had to sit back and look and say “you know we two different cultures, we two different races.” So, I had to sit back and look and adjust my style and see how she went about doing things.

John focused on his previous experience as a coach and having the ability to relate to individuals from different races.

The participants at EMS reflected on how they handled a situation when they took responsibility for an action that was offensive to the recipient. Willie recalled a situation in the locker room involving music.

Let's say a situation back in the locker room, taking it back to football, we were listening to music some of these guys listen to music that use the “N word” and words that aren't not used other in other communities. So, I just had to apologize to the other people who was listening to it. Hey, guys, we apologize for type of words that are coming out.

John answered hypothetically and centered his response around saying inappropriate things to students out of context and the need to apologize.

**Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers.** Willie suggested bringing in a motivational speaker that is culturally diverse and have them to provide training to the existing staff. John suggested using a movie for staff to watch and make the cultural connections as a group. Both participants expressed a need for some type of program train staff to relate to African American males in EMS.

**Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment.** The participants at EMS can use their multicultural skills to solve a problem. Willie reflected on his experience coaching sports and being able to communicate with athletes from different races and cultural backgrounds. John focused on practices in his classroom.

I try to handout projects. One of the things that I figured out is that doing projects in the classroom you can implement different races or where students come from. Projects help you really learn the students even more, so I try to do a lot of projects within my course.

**Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts.** CRSL requires for leaders to engage students in indigenous contexts. The participants at EMS described the CRL practices that are in place at their school for students with disabilities. Willie stated that no practices are currently in place to address students with disabilities. John stated parent teacher meetings, but did not elaborate on the nature and context of the meetings.

### ***Summary***

In 2018-2019 EMS accounted for the majority of SJSD's behavior infractions and removals. Black students were disproportionately removed when compared to Hispanic and White students. The Hispanic and White students make up the other two largest subgroups in

EMS. The participants at EMS do not experience a lot of special education placements. Staff perceive In School Suspension and Out of School Suspension as ineffective in addressing behavior infractions. There is a knowledge gap at EMS between the district level and middle school level special education staff. The participants at EMS were able to engage in a discussion regarding culture; however, they were unfamiliar with CRSL. They were to apply the tenets of CRSL to their leadership experience.

### **School 3: Village High School**

In presenting the findings for Village High School (VHS), I analyze special education data at the school and describe the results of my interviews with participants.

#### **Special Education Data and Policies at VHS**

In this section, I analyze the following documents from Village High School: special education enrollment and suspension data, mission and vision statements, school improvement plan, and the website. VHS is the only high school in the district and it serves grades 9-12 with a student enrollment of over 800 students. The school's profile website lists 54 classroom teachers, but it is also important to note that the staff also consists of several student support services staff. The high school is not considered a Title 1 school despite have 100% free and reduced lunch students. The student demographics include: 38% Hispanic, 31% African American, 20% White, and 11% other. VHS has over 80 students in the special education program.

Suspension and removal data indicate in 2018-2019 nondisabled Black students at VHS accounted for 66 behavior incidents and Black students with disabilities committed 40 incidents. Nondisabled Hispanic students at VHS account for 24 incidents and Hispanic students with disabilities accounted for 2 behavior incidents. Nondisabled White students committed 21 incidents and White students with disabilities accounted for nine incidents. Black students were

disproportionality removed from VHS when compared to the students from other two dominant races at EMS. Students classified as Emotional Disorder (ED) and Learning Disabled (LD) committed the most infractions.

The vision and mission statement for VHS were derived from the district's vision and mission statements. Both statements were expanded upon to address the school's level and needs. The SIP includes a goal for growing students and increasing proficiency in End of Course testing and reducing discipline referrals from the previous year. There is no official professional development plan for the school. VHS website lists the name and website link for the special education staff; however, there is no informational page for parents with questions and concerns. VHS utilizes the code of conduct established by the district as guidance for making behavior decisions.

## **Participant Perceptions of Special Education Practices at VHS**

### ***African American Males' Placement in Special Education***

Initial placement referrals for special education for African American male students are not occurring disproportionately at VHS. The participants recalled different experiences involving a situation for placement of an African American male in special education. Bobby is currently involved in a referral for an African American male student. He stated that the student's behavior led to the referral. Katherine reflected on a student that was placed during the fourth grade. Vernon the Special Ed Lead also recalled a placement situation on the elementary level.

And that was when I was in elementary. We had a team and they would meet and they would try different strategies in order to see if the student did qualify. My problem with that was at the time I wasn't really sure that this student needed the services, but they

were on this committee. They assumed based on the strategy they were trying, and I'm assuming they tried the legal amount, but I thought they could have gone further. But anyway, we placed him.

It is noted that the participants at VHS with elementary experience were able to recall placing an African American male in special education at the elementary level. African American males for the most part were placed in special education prior to attending VHS.

The participants at VHS expressed optimism for placing African American males in special education and positively impacting their social skills and social interactions. Bobby speaking on his current referral stated, "I think it'll be a positive effect on the social skills and his interactions, because you have people that are more trained to deal with what he has, you know what I mean." Katherine described some of the positive impacts that a student experienced in her classroom, but it was on the elementary level. Vernon also expressed feelings of positivity; however, again his experience was based on placing a student on the elementary level versus the high school.

The participants differed in their understanding of the term disproportionality and how the term related to students with disabilities. I provided Bobby with a definition and clarification of the term as it relates to his school. Katherine provided an answer in general terms, but never gave a definite definition.

My understanding of disproportionality in special education comes from the lens of both administrator and teacher, and seeing that oftentimes we don't have the cultural knowledge to be able to serve or to build a relationship with the student, to figure out how to serve them. So, the label is placed there to find somewhere, to stick them so that

they are removed because the behavior becomes something they're not able to manage or even take the time to understand.

Vernon's response is rooted at looking at the different cultures that students come from, but he did not elaborate on the term disproportionality and how it related to special education students.

The participants at VHS described the data trend for African American males being disproportionately referred to the special education program versus advanced and gifted programs (AIG). All participants described similar experiences. Bobby stated, "Yes, I see more in special education. I say out of those students, I was told we have probably about 80% of those students, and 89% of those students are African-American males." Katherine described her previous experience as a certified gifted teacher.

I was an AIG teacher. I'm certified. So, at the high school, I mean, at the middle school, I taught the AIG students and I would say you're probably spot on with that. There are more African American males in the Exceptional Children program as opposed to being in academically gifted. I think I had 1 to 2% of the students are served at the middle school that were African American. At the high school, it was probably in the upper level courses, African American males about the same ratio, 1 to 2% at five would be a stretch. Vernon the Special Ed Lead responded by stating "Oh, most definitely. I think those numbers are skewed way out of proportion. When you look at special education and you look at the A.I.G. program." The participants seem to agree with national trends based on their experiences that African American males are referred to disproportionately referred special education versus being referred to advanced and gifted learning programs.

### *African American Males' Removal from General Education*

Office referrals at VHS are handled according to the code of conduct policy that results in African American being disproportionately removed from their regular education setting. The participants at VHS described their knowledge of the suspension process and the safeguard protections afforded to students with disabilities. Bobby expressed a clear understanding.

So that we have a manifestation. You know, I'm saying they kind of decide, you know, if we're suspending those students right. According to, like I said, what's in their file, what the previous suspensions were. What kind of services have we provided? Have you reached out to the parent? You know, just the conversation we have from the IEP meetings, making sure that the kids are being supported and stuff like that.

Katherine recalled a scenario but did address the answer to the question. Katherine did indicate that she has participated in several MDR meetings in her career. Vernon is experienced in the MDR process. He failed to provide a specific example and reflected on the process for returning students to the regular education environment once they return from a removal.

African American males with disabilities are referred to the office for behavior incidents that often lead to removal due to consequences provided in the code of conduct policy. Bobby noted fights, inappropriate touching, and threats as reasons for office referrals. Katherine recalled that the students did not want to go to class and would skip class. Vernon recalled students skipping class, wandering the halls, and threatening staff, and he described an incident that involved an administrator being hit by an African American male with a disability.

We had an incident last year where the principal got slapped because he put his hands on the student. You can't do it. We had to learn not to grab them and not to touch them. He



put his hand on him, you know, the principal. The student got suspended for, I think for 5 days because he shouldn't have been grabbed.

The participants at VHS try to keep African American male students with disabilities that violate the code of conduct in class. Bobby expressed the need to follow the students' Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) if they have one. "Does it match the behavior, the behavior program, you know the consequences, the behavior plan, did it match their behavior plan." Katherine, the SLT member, detailed the need to investigate the setting and adjust the curriculum to interest African American males "so what are we doing in our instruction to support Black males? Then let's take it further so that we can find ways to support them a different way." The Special Ed Lead, Vernon, described the need to identify triggers and utilize de-escalation strategies.

The main thing that's very important is learn what the triggers are. Learn what it is that could cause them to. Well, this is my expression to go dark or to do something that they shouldn't do. I think a lot of times teachers have to be told this because they will push these kids' buttons, and that will cause them to do something they shouldn't do. We need to be proactive. In other words, if you know a situation is starting to brew and we need to teach our teachers this instead of you determined to get the last word sometimes, like, look, let the kid have the last word. It's going to de-escalate the problem.

The participants at VHS indicate that the removals have a negative impact on the student's behavior and academic performance. Bobby indicated that removals often make the behaviors worse, and sending students home may expose them to upset parents and more consequences at home. "You know, sometimes it makes them more agitated. It makes them more upset because they don't want to make their parent upset." Bobby also expressed the need to keep the students in the building placed in In-School-Suspension to at least provide basic services.

Katherine did not definitely state the impact that removals had on the student's behaviors or academic performance. Vernon responded by saying, "they definitely don't improve, and it just depends on the student." He expressed a similar belief as the other participants regarding In School Suspension being a better alternative than an Out of School Suspension. The participants perceive In-School Suspension as a support program and a viable alternative to suspending students from the building.

The participants at VHS were able to identify programs in their school for students with known behavior issues, and the school-level staff gave two different responses. Bobby referred to programs with the special education department that are educationally based and not related to behaviors. Katherine recalled a check-in and check-out system she plans to utilize but did not expand on utilizing the system with African American males. Vernon recalled the District's PRC 29 program for students with disabilities and behavior issues.

### ***Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework***

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) focuses on how school leaders can effectively serve minoritized students that have been historically marginalized in school and society. The participants at VHS were not familiar with the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) framework, but they were familiar with the term "culturally responsive" evidenced by Katherine and Bobby's definition of the term. I provided both of the participants with the definition and an explanation of the framework.

**Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors.** CRSL requires for leaders to critically reflect on their leadership behaviors. The participants at VHS reflected on their leadership behaviors and recalled a time that they had to adapt their style or decision making to work effectively with people different from them. Bobby reflected his answer on dealing with

the students “so we have a lot of students, we have a 40% Hispanic population. So, just building relationships with them is different.” Katherine responded in general terms that adapting was a part of their everyday experience at the high school “that's kind of what I needed every day to work at the high school.”

Self-reflection requires for leaders to recall situations that caused unintentional harm.

Bobby reflected on a situation with a parent.

I guess when I had a parent come in and just talking to her and I might have said something. You know, she took it the wrong way, something I said. And so just going back and talking to them and try to get them to understand, you know, the way I was saying it.

Katherine recalled a situation with a student that posed a safety risk and understanding the that the school was unable to meet the student’s needs.

At the high school. There are lots of times when I stood my ground about students. You know, as an assistant principal, you're working in compliment or concert to the principal, so you don't have the ability to override. But this student needed something other than what we could provide because the child hated school. He needed an alternate placement that supported him better. So, I stood my ground. I said, Absolutely not. This is what we're going to do because if you don't, then we're going to have problems.

**Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers.** Katherine the SLT member discussed utilizing professional development and the importance of telling your personal story.

Well, part of that is the Professional Development Discussion board putting up things that are always comfortable to talk about and in staff meeting, including those things, observations that have been made, you know. I even talked about my own personal

history, about how the struggle, when parents are raising kids and they have structures and not put in place to support that, it just complicates that. So. People are living their realities and suffering. Trauma and trauma don't necessarily mean that somebody's physically punching in you in your face. It's trauma of struggle and trauma of not having enough. So always infusing that in there that my mother was a single parent, you know, being married to my dad for 17 years and divorcing. She was a single parent who had to work. So, what did you label my mother? Because she couldn't come to parent teacher conference. What did you label my mother? What would you start? Because I asked him that instead of me, I put a triangle up. I said, What assumptions have we made? Yes, we've made these assumptions, but we don't know the true story. Let's take time to get to know them, find out, and then change our language. You don't talk at them. Talk to them. Talk with them.

Though she discussed a lot the other participants did not mention anything related to her response.

**Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment.** The participants at VHS can utilize their multicultural skills to solve a problem. Bobby reflected on a large fight that occurred at the school that involved Hispanic students that required the staff to use their multicultural skills to solve the issue. Bobby expressed the importance of building relationships and trust with the students to determine what happened and providing safety for the students that provided information. Katherine, the SLT member, reflected on a situation with a parent and teacher from different cultures.

This happened in the classroom. I did my investigation. I said I'll look into it. I'll promise that I'll come back with a solution or have an answer for you. But I knew in my heart

what I needed to do. So, I called her back. I said, well, my investigation did not corroborate or support what you said. I know the teacher. I know because I've watched this teacher in summer school and all these things. If your child is in the hospital, she's coming. I said the door is always open. Let's give it a minute, and I promise you will be all right.

**Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts.** The participants at VHS reflected on the practices at their school for placing African American male students in special education and then suspending them after being placed. Bobby could not identify any current programs in VHS. He expressed an interest in and need for a program. Katherine also could not recall any specific programs, but she expressed a plan for implementing new programs once her job transfer is complete.

### *Summary*

VHS's School Improvement Plan has a goal to reduce behavior infractions from the previous year, therefore indicating that the school has identified a school-wide behavior problem. Black students and Black students with disabilities are suspended disproportionately compared to Hispanic and White students. The participants at VHS engage in practices to avoid removing African American male students. Placing students in ISS and OSS is ineffective and often leads to the student falling behind academically. There is a staff perception that placing a student in OSS is providing them help versus placing them in OSS. The participants expressed the need to build relationships with students, and once a relationship is established, communication, trust, and behaviors improve. High school students with disabilities at VHS engage in the MDR process. There are currently no clubs or school-wide behavior programs in VHS. The PRC 29 program was listed as a behavior support program for students with disabilities. CRSL was a new

concept for the staff, but based on their responses during the interviews, they were able to apply the four tenets of CRSL to their leadership experiences.

### **Themes**

Four themes emerged because of my analysis of the data related to my case study of SJSD. I list the themes in this section, and I utilize them to answer my research questions in the next chapter.

- Theme I: In SJSD, African American Males Are Placed Disproportionately in Special Education Early in Their Schooling and Remain in the Program Throughout Secondary School.
- Theme II: The Saint John's District Code of Conduct Intentionally Contributes to Disproportionately Removing African American Males with Disabilities from their Regular Education Environment.
- Theme III: There is a Gap in Special Education Knowledge Between the District's Special Education Staff and the School Level Personnel.
- Theme IV: The Participants in SJSD are Not Familiar with CRSL But They Are Using Practices from the Framework.

These themes represent the findings from my case study interviews, and I analyze them in more detail in Chapter V.

### **Conclusion**

In studying the Saint John's School District, I analyzed state-level, district-level, and school-level policies and data. I conducted interviews with district level and school-level participants in SJSD. I analyzed the data and identified four emergent themes. In the next chapter, I summarize my study and then answer my research questions with my findings. In

order to analyze my findings, I connect them with existing research. I conclude the chapter by providing recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and my final thoughts.

## CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

African American male students in the Saint John's School District (SJSD) are having negative experiences in school and are more likely to encounter success in preparing for the school-to-prison pipeline instead of experiencing the pathway to educational success and achieving academic success in schools. Likewise, as Townsend Walker (2012) described, the school-to-prison concept and associated African American males' negative school experiences lead them away from school and into the juvenile justice system. The participants in SJSD also expressed the need to keep African American males in school as a way to minimize their opportunities to engage in criminal and delinquent behaviors in their neighborhoods. As noted previously, one out of every three Black boys born today can expect to be sentenced to prison, compared to one out of six Latino boys and one out of 17 White boys (NAACP, 2021). IDEA and special education services are intended to protect student rights and provide specially designed instruction to bridge the educational gap for students with disabilities. The same laws and policies intended to protect the educational rights of African American males, though, places them disproportionately in special education programs. Once placed in special education to receive assistance and help, many African American males in SJSD are disproportionately removed from their placement in the general education environment. It is good that the students are receiving support for their own educational and behavioral issues; however, it is concerning that once the student's issues are identified, they are still disproportionality removed from classes placing them further behind educationally.

I conducted my study into practices in SJSD in order to understand the plight of African American males with disabilities as well as those who encounter exclusionary discipline practices. I investigated the participants' perspectives about placing African American males in



special education, removing them from school, and utilizing CRSL as a framework for leadership. In this chapter, I answer my research questions with my findings. In addition, I analyze my findings by connecting them to existing research. I conclude by providing recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and my final thoughts.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In this section, I revisit my research questions and answer them with my findings. To further my analysis, I connect my findings to existing research.

#### **Research Question 1**

In my first research question, I asked, *What are current data in the district around suspensions and special education placement for African American male students, and how have data changed over time?* I found that African American male students experience difficulty in the Saint John's School District (SJSD). The African American population made up the largest student population in the special education program at Saint John's School District. Notably, though, the state's public instruction agency and the district do not collect special education data segregated by race and gender. SJSD is attempting to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to African American males; however, based on the principles of social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2007), SJSD served as a barrier for African American males through policy and program implementation. The special education program in SJSD is the only program for students needing additional support, and that often resulted in a large number of special education referrals for Black students.

In SJSD, African American male students are placed in special education based on psychological assessments and biased diagnostic educational assessments. However, it is important to note that SJSD and every school system located in their state are responsible for

implementing their own local special education policies and procedures based on a policy manual provided by the state-level special education department. Importantly, DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) found that little research has been conducted to investigate or understand district-level policies in special education. Though the district-level special education leaders in SJSD reviewed the state policies and procedures and engaged in professional development training to enhance their special education knowledge regarding special education policy and compliantly enforcing the policy to address disproportionality, there was still disproportionality in the district.

The state's department of instruction provides data regarding student enrollment and the disability category, enrollment and race, and enrollment and sex. Posters are laced throughout SJSD and all schools within the district. The posters contain instructions and laws regarding special education referrals; however, there is no website for parents to access when they experience a problem and are not physically in a building. The individual SIP plans for each school resembled the district's improvement plan. There are no district or school-level equity plans or initiatives, but the term is posted on various websites and documents within the district. The special education department utilizes an infographic to explain the special education process and specially designed instruction.

Some in SJSD may attribute the underperformance of African American males in SJSD to the possibility of learning disabilities and cognitive disabilities. However, the lack of exposure to evidence-based instruction and the lack of availability of effective teachers were not considered prior to or after the special education referral process. As I stated in the previous chapter, Southside Elementary School had a vacancy for their special education teacher position. Alqarni (2016) also found the lack of appropriate teachers to be a cause of disproportionality in

special education. The SJSD's website also listed several licensed teacher vacancies on the elementary and secondary levels. The school-level administrators in SJSD, Mary and Katherine, expressed the need for their staff to self-reflect and think from different perspectives in order to effectively educate and reach African American males. Data indicates that African American students, in general, are experiencing significant problems in SJSD.

Data also showed that African American students, in general, regardless of having a disability, experienced behavior difficulty in SJSD and were subject to high suspension rates. The suspension data analysis for SJSD from the 2018 school year and the 2019 school year indicate that African American students are disproportionately suspended from SJSD. In 2018, in the special education program at Southside Elementary School, African Americans were the only students with disabilities that experienced suspensions. The Black students at Eastview Middle School and Village High School accounted for the largest number of suspensions when compared to the district's Hispanic and White students. This is similar to a study by Fisher et al. (2020), who found that Black students were more likely to experience one or more out-of-school suspensions than their White peers.

Furthermore, in SJSD African American students accounted for 278 behavior incidents in 2018-2019; however, over 200 of those incidents were committed at Eastview Middle School. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the system to close during the 2019-2020 school year. Therefore, the data reported was for a half year and African American students continued to commit the most offenses at Eastview Middle School. Eastview Middle School continued to have the most incidents in SJSD during the shortened year.

During my interviews with key school personnel in the district, Mary, the Elementary School Leadership Team member, recalled her former African American male student in

prekindergarten that experienced behavior issues that led to his special education referral. In a similar study, Wright and Ford (2016) found that African American males represent a small percentage of the preschool population, but they account for almost half of the suspensions for first-time offenders. Mary implemented a support program to avoid suspending the younger student multiple times. It is frightening and painful to imagine the feeling of being 4 and not being able to adjust to one's culture to the extent that I am deemed disabled in a school unequipped to meet my cultural needs and deny my rights to democracy.

### **Research Question 2**

In my second research question, I asked, *How do school leaders describe their experiences regarding African American male students' suspensions and placement in special education?* I found first that, in the Saint John's School District, **African American males are disproportionately referred to and placed in special education early in their public education and remain in the program throughout secondary school.** The responses from the participants in each school described the initial placement of students occurring during elementary years. Brenda from SES recalled placing an African American male in special education from a referral team and the hesitancy in placing the student due to disproportionality concerns. Her scenario implied that the student needed help, but the policy involving disproportionality implemented to help the student was actually serving as a barrier. Mary, the Elementary School Leadership Team member, once again reflected on the special education referral for her pre-kindergarten African American male student and how the referral resulted in him being placed in special education in the pre-kindergarten program. "He was with us for two years and pre-K, and he made gains his kindergarten year." Charlotte, the District Elementary Special Education Lead, recalled a special education placement from last year for a second-grade

African American male. Each participant was able to easily recall a situation when asked to reflect on their experiences.

Willie, the Middle School Level Staff, indicated that he was not familiar with initial placement meetings for placing African American males in special education because initial placements normally do not occur on the middle school level. Willie elaborated that he normally participated in reevaluation meetings that determined the continued eligibility for students. John from the middle school leadership team recalled a placement that occurred with a sixth-grade student. John's experience is a noted exception for this district. Lois, the Special Education Lead with only secondary-level experience in special education, provided a similar experience to Willie's, indicating that in her experience, initial placements rarely occurred at the secondary level, and placements occurred during the reevaluation process.

Well, I can't, no. I have not because I've always been in secondary. So, the students that I had during my time [have] been as a classroom teacher and have already been identified. I have had other students that transferred in during that time that we had made special education.

The participants from Village High School expressed similarly rare experiences to the Eastview Middle School participants regarding placing African American males in special education. Bobby from the school staff, however, was involved in a current placement decision and his first initial placement decision in Village High School. Katherine and Vernon had to reflect on their previous experience working in various elementary schools in SJSD and placing an African American male in special education. In Katherine's experience she was the referring teacher and identified the student's deficits. Vernon recalled his previous experience as an elementary referral team member. He described not fully agreeing with the team's procedures

that resulted in the student qualifying for special education. “I’m assuming they tried the legal amount, but I thought they could have gone further. But anyway, we placed him.”

In the second finding related to my research question about the experiences of participants with African American male special education placement and suspensions, I discovered that the **Saint John’s District Code of Conduct intentionally contributed to disproportionately removing African American males with disabilities from their regular education environment.** The Saint John’s District Code of Conduct policy is implemented as a district initiative and serves as the foundation for handling behavior infractions. The policy lists the offense and the possible punishment per educational level. Subjective behaviors are based on the personal perspective and interpretation of the recipient. Disrespect, being defiant, refusals, and aggression are examples of subjective behaviors. The subjective behaviors displayed by African American male students with disabilities require punishment in the form of Out-of-School Suspension and possible referrals to law enforcement. A law enforcement referral is also an option for elementary offenders. Data provided by the state’s department of instruction provided incident data based on ethnicity/race, disability, the incident type, consequence description, number of incidents, number of suspensions, and the number of unique students. There is no data provided by the state segregating the data by race, gender, offense, etc.

In SJSD, African American males with disabilities are protected by procedural safeguards; however, they are still removed from their regular education placement for disciplinary reasons based on the District’s Code of Conduct. Removals from the regular education environment take the form of time out, seating students in the hall or in another classroom, In School Suspension (ISS), Out of School Suspensions (OSS), early dismissal, and bus suspensions. The participants in Southside Elementary School described limited experiences

with suspending African American males on the elementary level; however, they provided knowledge regarding behavior infractions that resulted in the students being removed from class.

All three participants in Southside Elementary School described subjective student behaviors as causes for removals, similar to the study by Skiba et al. (2002), who also found that African American students are referred to the office for subjective behaviors. Brenda supported the claim as she recalled subjective infractions for being defiant, talking back, classroom disruptions, and sleeping in class as reasons for removals. For Mary, subjective infractions for being off task and being disrespectful were the main two areas of concern. Charlotte observed subjective behavior infractions for refusals and outbursts. In-School-Suspension programs do not exist in Southside Elementary School or any other elementary school in SJSD.

The Eastview Middle School participants also described subjective incidents that resulted in removing African American males from their regular education placement; however, the participants included implications for behaviors increasing in intensity as the students got older. Willie indicated cussing, horseplay, disrespect, and fighting. John from the leadership team asserted that the physical nature of some African American males with disabilities is intimidating. Lois focused her response on the inability of African American males to express themselves in the proper context effectively as a reason for them being removed from class.

The Village High School participants identified minor incidents such as skipping class and wandering the halls as reasons for removals. Bobby noted fights as a reason for removal. Vernon described a situation of violence against a staff member. “We had an incident last year where the principal got slapped because he put his hands on the student.” He explained that the team conducted an MDR meeting and determined that the student’s action was related to his disability, and he was returned to school from the proposed suspension.

In my last finding related to my second research question, I identified **a gap in the special education knowledge between the district’s special education staff and the school-level personnel**. Knowing the special education policy is essential in handling referrals for special education placement. The personnel at the school were not familiar with the term “disproportionality” and the ramifications for violations, while the district-level staff was familiar with the policy. It is important to note that placements occur at the school level. There is also a gap in understanding the policy for suspending students with disabilities and when their procedural safeguards are implemented. The elementary-level staff in SJSD may not experience a lot of suspensions, but it is imperative that they are familiar with the policies. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) also found the need for additional studies on district-level policies in special education. Noncompliance with either policy results in poor performance on the state’s measurement indicators and contribute to financial loss for the district.

The district staff were familiar with programs in the district to address the behaviors of students with disabilities. The PRC 29 program was mentioned in several instances as a possible program for disabled students with behavior issues. PRC 29 is a behavior support grant funded program to aimed support students with disabilities. The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) was also mentioned by the District’s Special Education Leads as alternative programs to address students that are struggling. Belser et al. (2016) also argued the need for MTSS as a support for marginalized students of color displaying behavior issues. However, the MTSS process does not exist in SJSD. While the district plans to have MTSS implemented at each level next year, there was no mention of MTSS on any of the individual school’s websites or documents that I reviewed. There was also no communication plan for providing parents with



information regarding the MTSS process compared to the posters and flyers posted throughout the district promoting special education.

### **Research Question 3**

In my third and final research question, I asked: *According to participants, to what degree have culturally responsive leadership practices been implemented to address these issues?* I found that the participants in SJSD are not familiar with Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) but they are using practices from the framework. It was clear from my review of district documents that SJSD lacked clear attention in CRSL. In reviewing SJSD's website, vision and mission statement, and strategic plan for improvement there was very little mentioned about the district being culturally responsive; however, there were general references to culture and equity. The district's vision and mission statements are utilized by the individual schools as a guide for completion. There are many similarities between the district's strategic plan and the individual school's school improvement plans. The district and the individual schools had the community-based resources listed for families needing assistance. The school plans listed the need for professional development but there was no professional development calendar available.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) Framework is a fairly new concept to the case participants, based on their responses from their interviews. For example, the participants from the elementary school failed to provide a clear understanding of the CRSL concept. Brenda and Charlotte based their understanding on the student level and the student's culture.

The Eastview Middle School participants also failed to provide a definition or engage in a discussion around the general term culture. At the high school, Katherine expressed a general

understanding of CRSL based on her previous experience as graduate student at a local university. She expressed how her university specialized in cultural foundations and her courses provided her with experience and understanding of the concept. Vernon also expressed a general understanding of cultural responsiveness.

To further my inquiry, I provided all of the participants with the CRSL definition and my interview questions allowed the participants in SJSD to apply their experiences to the tenets of CRSL regardless of their knowledge of the concept. The participants reflected on the fact that African American males are rarely referred to advanced and gifted program when compared to special education referrals. SJSD utilizes a traditional conduct policy, a traditional special education referral process, and lack intervention programs to address African American male's academic deficits and social emotional learning. The traditional programs and lack of intervention programs contribute to African American males' disproportionate placement in special education and the high suspension rate for Black students in SJSD. Khalifa (2019) found that the traditional policies currently used in schools are outdated and not meeting indigenous students' post-secondary needs. The use of traditional models is SJSD's contribution to the school to prison pipeline.

### **Recommendations**

In this section, I provide recommendations for practice and research.

#### **Recommendations for Practice**

Public school districts in the United States, in general, and SJSD, in particular, continue to fail to meet the educational needs and social needs of African American males and females with and without disabilities. Districts with high populations of marginalized students are obligated to explore culturally responsive training. The marginalized African American students

in SJSD make up one of the largest ethnic groups in the district. Similarly, in 2017, Lustick argued “applying culturally relevant pedagogy to positive discipline means infusing discipline practices with sensitivity towards students’ home cultures and the experience of marginalized racial groups” (p. 692); therefore, it is imperative for SJSD district leaders to engage in the work to provide an inclusive environment for all students and to become culturally proficient leaders. Lindsey et al. (2009) argued that leadership utilizing cultural proficiency tools results in equitable and inclusive experiences for marginalized students. Mary, the Elementary School Leadership Team member, and Katherine, the High School Leadership Team member, expressed the need for their staff to engage in practices that allowed them to think from the perspectives of their students and parents. Katherine recalled her mother being a single parent and missing school-sponsored events, but that did not mean that her mother was not involved or concerned about her education.

A deliberate and targeted planned professional development schedule addressing the plight of historically marginalized students is essential in training culturally responsive staff. During the training process, district leaders would benefit from reviewing their conduct policies and removal recommendations based on a culturally responsive perspective. To achieve consistency and the dissemination of correct information, district-level special education leaders would benefit from utilizing the training-the-trainer model. In the model, the district team develops the professional development, trains district-level staff to conduct the training session, and then the district staff provides the training to the school staff. Leaders must be attentive to the resistance and hesitancy of their staff to engage in this challenging work. Theoharis (2007) also found the need for creating supportive structures in schools and building relationships with

school staff to support leaders as they face resistance. The proposed special education professional development plan for SJSD can be found in Appendix C.

District leaders also need to be deliberate in their data collection methods and approaches to addressing injustices. Strategic plans should include goals to address marginalized students, reduce opportunity gaps, and have high expectations for growing students. To collect meaningful data, leaders must be deliberate in their data collection methods. DeMatthews (2014) also identified the need for exposure to social justice and challenging the status quo. In my study, there was no available state data or district data segregated in terms of disability, race, and gender. The plight of African American males in public education is a known phenomenon; however, states and schools fail to collect data to address the problems. Special education employees in small school districts often conduct various job functions across several departments. District- and school-level data managers are needed to collect and organize special education data. Special education directors are tasked with completing federal and state reports, grants, and budgets; therefore, making it almost impossible to maintain all of the needed databases. In small districts, on the district level, the data manager or administrative assistant serves multiple departments leading to a large number of duties and responsibilities.

School districts that fail to implement mandated programs and policies limit the options for support programs to serve students in need. In smaller districts like SJSD, the lack of response to intervention programs led to a high referral rate for the special education program. Special education referrals in SJSD are based on a student's low achievement on standardized testing. Placement in the SJSD's special education program depends on performance outcomes from achievement and aptitude tests; however, the evidence-based Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) response to the intervention model addresses the Instruction, Curriculum,

Environment (ICE). Utley and Obiakor (2015) found that MTSS focused on providing evidence-based strategies and interventions that lead to improved educational outcomes for all students. It is imperative for district leaders in SJSD to emphasize the expectation for MTSS implementation at the district level and school level to improve the outcomes for all students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There is a need for more empirical studies to investigate the special education experience for African American males. There are several studies identifying African American males' disproportionate placement in special education and suspensions; however, few studies exist addressing the effectiveness of the special education services provided to the students. African American males are disproportionately placed in special education programs, but they continue to underperform on end-of-grade and end-of-course standardized testing. There needs to be a way for African American males to tell their stories regarding special education placement in their own words. SJSD and districts across the nation must consider evaluating the traditional model being used in schools utilizing the tenets of Culturally Responsive School Leadership. Similarly, Valencia and Suzuki (2000) recommended that "training and practices of identification for special education services be as culturally sensitive as possible" (p. 207).

There is also a need for studies that investigate the effectiveness of In School Suspension (ISS) programs. Elementary schools do not have ISS programs, and the staff learn to deal with behaviors using alternative methods; however, all secondary schools have ISS programs. ISS at SJSD is a classroom with one staff member that administers restrictive procedures requiring students to remain silent, remain seated while assigned in the classroom, and complete missed assignments with limited support. The ISS classroom makeup is an inequitable opportunity for African American males with disabilities in SJSD. Students with disabilities diagnosed with

attention disabilities, hyperactive disabilities, and learning disabilities are doomed when they enter the door of the SJSD's ISS programs. In contrast, the school leaders in SJSD perceive ISS as helping the students avoid being removed from school. However, the literature suggests that ISS is a school-to-prison preparatory program.

Based on the results from my study of SJSD, there is a need for further research into the benefits of implementing evidence-based behavior management programs to address behavior incidents. Eastview Middle School alone had over 200 offenses committed by Black students and accounted for the majority of the behavior incidents for the entire SJSD utilizing the district's current conduct policy. The District Conduct Policy is the behavior management program in SJSD. Mansfield et al. (2018) examined social justice leadership in the area of discipline and suggested utilizing restorative practices as an alternative discipline approach. Lustick (2017) determined that policies are blamed for disproportionalities in suspension rates, and the disproportionality does not disappear when substituted with positive discipline practices.

### **Final Thoughts**

During my time as a student in public education as an African American male, I witnessed several of my male friends face problems and barriers in school. It was during my final years in high school when things seemed to be at their worst. It was a difficult experience seeing individuals that I grew up with and lived with in my community face suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out of high school. During my time in school, special education was looked at as an isolated program that was accompanied by harsh and judgmental remarks for students in the program. I later pursued a career in education to help African American male students with behavior issues. During my tenure as a special education teacher, I noticed that the majority of my caseload were African American males. I had the opportunity to reach students

that were deemed unreachable and at risk at the middle school level. The unjust conditions, exclusionary practices implemented, and the low administrative expectations for my students began my quest as a social justice advocate for marginalized students. I always told my students that the streets would lead them to jail or death. I experienced the death of three of my African American male students during my tenure as a teacher, and I would not wish that feeling on anyone. Seeing these young men in their coffins at the ages of 16-18 initiated a desire in me that will always drive me to provide social justice to the unjust.

I was able to place meaning, purpose, and theory to work during my tenure as a School Administration graduate student at North Carolina A&T State University. It was here that I was first introduced to the national problem facing African American males or Black boys. I had previously viewed the problem in terms of my experience as a student and teaching students with disabilities specifically behavior disabilities in my local district. I had no idea that this was a national epidemic until my graduate studies. It was also during this time that I was introduced to the term culturally proficiency and how the practices served as support for educating my students. As a special education teacher, one is often perceived as making excuses for students that are capable of controlling their behavior and making decisions on their own.

I am intrigued by the fact that it is no secret that African American males have traditionally struggled in public education; however, there has been no national legislation, policy, or initiatives to specifically address the problem. The data and scores indicate that African American males continue to underperform on standardized testing and other achievement measures, yet the public education system continues to ignore their problem. The current trend is to place the students in special education opposed to analyzing the curriculum, evaluating the teacher, and implementing policy to create equitable and culturally responsive

opportunities. States are implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) policies in form of Multi-Tiered Support Systems (MTSS); however, implementation and monitoring is conducted by the local district that often fail to implement the program with efficacy. It is sad that policy must be initiated to ensure that students receive the democratic rights afforded to them in public education.

I found in my study that African American males in a small school district are disproportionately placed in special education and suspended after being placed in special education. There is no data to indicate that placement in special education is a direct correlation to student academic and behavior success in public schools. I was surprised to find that key school personnel had knowledge of African American males struggling in their district, but there were no programs in place to address the problem. It is also important to note that all of the building principals in the study schools were in their first principalship. The school level personnel decisions appear to be guided by district level support and district level guidance despite having the ability to create their own programs and plans. The SJSD District Level Special Education Department is committed to bridging the special education knowledge gap between the district level personnel and school level personnel in order to produce equitable outcomes for African American males in their district.



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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/PROTOCOL FOR  
DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

**District Leadership**

My name is Ray Horton and I am an EdD student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am conducting research for my case study regarding the placement and suspension of African American male students with disabilities and the use of culturally responsive leadership to ensure that the students receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). My research data collection methods consist of interviews (state, district, and school leaders), document analysis, and cross analysis.

Participation in the study is voluntary and all of the information that you provide will be collected in confidence as well as the protection of your personal information. Are you willing to participate in my study and add your valuable insight? If yes, do I have your permission to record our interview?

Please sign the consent agreement!

Please repeat the following statement: I (your name) consent to this interview and give me permission for it to be recorded!

**General Questions**

1. Please state your name.
2. How many years have you worked in education?
3. Please tell me the story of how you obtained your current position and please describe your duties and responsibilities?

## **African American Males with Disabilities Experience (District) and Disproportionality**

1. What is the student population for the district?
2. How is this population defined in terms of race and gender?
  - Total population
  - Total per race and gender
3. How many students in the district classified as Exceptional Children (EC)?
4. Please describe your district's data trend in regard to African American male placement in special education vs. AIG/AP?
5. Please explain your understanding of disproportionality in Special Education?
6. What is your experience with disproportionality and African American males with disabilities?
7. Are familiar with the North Carolina policy for addressing disproportionate placement and suspensions for students with disabilities? If so, what are some of the ramifications for noncompliance? If you are not familiar can explain either or both and then you can share your thoughts for understanding.
8. Can you recall and describe a time that you were involved in the special education placement for an African American male
  - What was the grade level?
  - What area did he qualify for?
  - What was the referral source?
  - How did his academic performance improve after placement (Ex. Honor Roll, EOG/EOC scores, etc.)

9. Did his placement have a positive or negative effect on his social skills and social interactions?

## **Suspension**

1. Tell me about a time when you had to suspend or was involved in a suspension of an African American male with disabilities.
  - Describe the incident
  - How did the student's disability pre and post incident influence your decision making?
  - Describe the policy that influenced your decision.
  - Was a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) required? If yes, what was the outcome? If no, please recall an experience you had with a MDR?
2. Please explain and describe some practices that you use to avoid suspending African American males with disabilities?
3. How are suspensions handled prior to the 10th suspension date?
4. How are suspensions handled after the 10th suspension date?
5. Tell me based on your experiences what are some of the behaviors that African American males with disabilities are suspended?
6. What are some behavior support programs in your district for students with known behavior issues?
7. How effective is in-school and out of school suspension on African American males with disabilities?
  - Do behaviors improve, stay the same, or get worse after the punishment?
  - What impact does removals have on students' academic performance?



- Do you feel that the student's disability was taking into consideration prior to the punishment?
8. Are you familiar with Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP)? Please Explain.
  9. Do the majority African American male students with disabilities with behavior goals in your district have an updated FBA and BIP?
  10. When are FBA and BIPs updated in your district?

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices**

1. Are you familiar with the term Culturally Responsive Leadership? If yes, please explain your understanding? If no, I can provide you with a definition and we can discuss it?
2. What are some CRL practices in place in your district?
3. How are CRL practices implemented in your district?
4. How are these CRL practices measured for fidelity?
5. What CRL practices are in place to address special education placement and suspensions for African American males with disabilities? If no practices are in place please explain why?
6. Tell me about a time that you adapted your style or decision to work effectively with those who were different from you.
7. What do you see as the most challenging aspects of an increasingly diverse academic community, and what steps have you taken or plan to take to meet such challenges?
8. What would do to motivate and engage students, faculty and/or staff in learning varied perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and social justice?

9. Describe a situation in which you utilized your multicultural skills to solve a problem.
10. Please comment on the benefits of racial, ethnic and gender diversity in your district?
11. Tell me about a time you took responsibility/accountability for an action that may have been offensive to the recipient and how you did that.
12. How do you seek opportunities to improve the learning environment to better meet the needs of students who have been historically marginalized in the USA, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos (etc.)?
13. Describe your experience or explain how you have been educated to understand the history of African American, Latinos, Native Americans and other historically marginalized communities in the USA.

### **End Script**

That concludes our interview. I would like to thank you for participating in my study and contributing to providing social justice for traditionally marginalized students. I would like to provide you with my contact information and obtain your information just in case there is a need to follow up for clarification, ask additional questions, or obtain additional information from you.

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/PROTOCOL FOR  
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAM (SLT) REPRESENTATIVES AND EC TEACHERS/CASE  
MANAGERS

**School Leadership Team (SLT) Rep & EC Teachers/Case Managers**

My name is Ray Horton and I am an EdD student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am conducting research for my case study regarding the placement and suspension of African American male students with disabilities and the use of culturally responsive leadership to ensure that the students receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). My research data collection methods consist of interviews (state, district, and school leaders), document analysis, and cross analysis.

Participation in the study is voluntary and all of the information that you provide will be collected in confidence as well as the protection of your personal information. Are you willing to participate in my study and add your valuable insight? If yes, do I have your permission to record our interview?

Please sign the consent agreement!

Please repeat the following statement: I (your name) consent to this interview and give me permission for it to be recorded!

**General Questions**

1. Please state your name.
2. How many years have you worked in education?
3. Please tell me the story of how you obtained your current position and please describe your duties and responsibilities?

## **African American Males with Disabilities Experience (School) and Disproportionality**

1. What is the student population for your school?
2. How is this population defined in terms of race and gender?
  - Total population
  - Total per race and gender
3. How many students in your school is classified as Exceptional Children (EC)?
4. Please describe your school's data trend in regard to African American male placement in special education vs. AIG/AP?
5. Please explain your understanding of disproportionality in Special Education?
6. What is your experience with disproportionality and African American males with disabilities?
7. Are familiar with the North Carolina policy for addressing disproportionate placement and suspensions for students with disabilities? If so, what are some of the ramifications for noncompliance? If you are not familiar can explain either or both and then you can share your thoughts for understanding.
8. Can you recall and describe a time that you were involved in the special education placement for an African American male
  - What was the grade level?
  - What area did he qualify for?
  - What was the referral source?
  - How did his academic performance improve after placement (Ex. Honor Roll, EOG/EOC scores, etc.)

9. Did his placement have a positive or negative effect on his social skills and social interactions?

## **Suspension**

1. Tell me about a time when you had to suspend or was involved in a suspension of an African American male with disabilities.
  - Describe the incident
  - How did the student's disability pre and post incident influence your decision making?
  - Describe the policy that influenced your decision.
  - Was a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) required? If yes, what was the outcome? If no, please recall an experience you had with a MDR?
2. Please explain and describe some practices that you use to avoid suspending or making office referrals for African American males with disabilities?
3. How are suspensions handled prior to the 10th suspension date?
4. How are suspensions handled after the 10th suspension date?
5. Tell me based on your experiences what are some of the behaviors that African American males with disabilities are referred to the office?
6. What are some behavior support programs in school for students with known behavior issues?
7. How effective is in-school and out of school suspension on African American males with disabilities?
  - Do behaviors improve, stay the same, or get worse after the punishment?
  - What impact does removals have on students' academic performance?

- Do you feel that the student's disability was taking into consideration prior to the punishment?
8. Are you familiar with Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP)? Please Explain.
  9. Do the African American male students with disabilities with behavior goals in your school have an updated FBA and BIP?
  10. When are FBA and BIPs updated in you school?

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices**

1. Are you familiar with the term Culturally Responsive Leadership? If yes, please explain your understanding? If no, I can provide you with a definition and we can discuss it?
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3. How are CRL practices implemented in your school?
4. How are these CRL practices measured for fidelity?
5. What CRL practices are in place to address special education placement and suspensions for African American males with disabilities? If no practices are in place please explain why?
6. Tell me about a time that you adapted your style or decision to work effectively with those who were different from you.
7. What do you see as the most challenging aspects of an increasingly diverse academic community, and what steps have you taken or plan to take to meet such challenges?
8. What would do to motivate and engage students, faculty and/or staff in learning varied perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and social justice?

9. Describe a situation in which you utilized your multicultural skills to solve a problem.
10. Please comment on the benefits of racial, ethnic and gender diversity in your school?
11. Tell me about a time you took responsibility/accountability for an action that may have been offensive to the recipient and how you did that.
12. How do you seek opportunities to improve the learning environment to better meet the needs of students who have been historically marginalized in the USA, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos (etc.)?
13. Describe your experience or explain how you have been educated to understand the history of African American, Latinos, Native Americans and other historically marginalized communities in the USA.

### **End Script**

That concludes our interview. I would like to thank you for participating in my study and contributing to providing social justice for traditionally marginalized students. I would like to provide you with my contact information and obtain your information just in case there is a need to follow up for clarification, ask additional questions, or obtain additional information from you.

APPENDIX C: PROPOSED SPECIAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR KEY  
PERSONNEL IN SJSD

**Proposed Special Education Development Plan for Key Personnel in SJSD**

**July:**

- The Special Education Director meets with the superintendent to discuss the district's data regarding disproportionality in special education placement and suspensions.

**August:**

- The Special Education Director presents data regarding special education disproportionality placements and suspensions in the district and the plan for addressing disproportionality to district and school administrators at the opening year meeting.
- The district-level special education staff present data to the school-level staff at the opening year meeting regarding special education disproportionality in the district and the plan for addressing disproportionality in the district.

**September:**

- The district-level special education staff will conduct a special education coaching session on New Forms and Procedures with the special education teachers in the district.

**October:**

- The district-level special education staff will conduct a coaching session on special education referral data with special education teachers.
- Conduct a district meeting for all special education staff in the district.
- The Special Education Director will train principals and district-level staff at the monthly administration meeting.

**November:**

- All special education teachers in the district register to attend the Annual Special Education Conference for additional training opportunities.
- All certified special education staff attend the Annual Special Education Conference.

**December:**

- The district-level special education staff will conduct two coaching sessions on Data Collection and Progress Monitoring.

**January:**

- Special education teachers participate in Quarterly Reviews with their assigned Program Specialist and Special Education Director at the end of the 2nd quarter to review each student in the district's progress and the appropriateness of services provided to meet their needs.

**February:**

- Conduct a meeting for all special education staff in the district.



- The Special Education Director will update principals and district-level staff at the monthly administration meeting regarding the data from the Quarterly Review Process.

**March:**

- Set up a Transition Day meeting schedule for special education staff to discuss, review, and address students transitioning from elementary to middle and middle to high school for the up-and-coming school year.

**April:**

- Special Education Teachers participate in Quarterly Reviews with their Special Education Program Specialist and the Special Education Director at the end of the 3rd quarter.
- The Special Education Director will discuss the Transition Day results at the monthly administration meeting.

**May:**

- The Special Education Director will update principals and district-level staff at the monthly administration meeting regarding the data from the Quarterly Review Process.

**June:**

- The Special Education Director and district-level special education staff will review the district's end-of-year data and engage in problem-solving and action steps for the next year.