An Examination of the Experiences of Five African American Male Students with

Regard to School Discipline Practices

by

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Dedication

I have to dedicate this project to God for providing me with the inner strength and resilience to remain focused on completing this study. To Monique, my wife, your support has been tremendous and unwavering. I would also like to thank my parents, Landlin and Peggy Earle for their instilling the importance of education in me at an early age. Lastly, to all of my family and friends who had confidence in me when I lost confidence in myself, thank you and I love you all.
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ABSTRACT

There are numerous studies that address the issue of discipline practices in schools. Within the last decade there have been an increasing number of scholars and school district personnel who have written about discipline, and more specifically, the discipline of specific populations of students such as African Americans. Although many of these studies address the disparate disciplinary practices that occur in many school districts, little attention is devoted to how students understand these practices in the larger context of their general school experiences. This research intends to fill the void in the literature that utilizes the experiences of students to understand inequitable discipline practices. The primary purpose of this study is to examine a selected group of “at-risk” African American male students’ experiences and beliefs about disciplinary practices used in school.
Chapter I
Introduction

Studies support the notion that public schools subject many African American students, especially males, to inequitable discipline practices (Schwartz, 2001). Of interest in the present study is the quality of these students’ perceptions and understanding of those practices. The focus of the study will include attention to the forms of discipline by teachers and administrators that may be perceived as cruel in intent and/or effect. For the purposes of this study, cruelty will be defined as the disciplinary practices that African American males believe to be physically and/or psychologically harmful.

Much of the literature on discipline focuses on methods of behavior control and, to a lesser extent, principles of fairness and social equity in the administration of those methods. However, not much has been reported about how students respond to discipline psychologically and what they tell themselves about the purpose, fairness and civility of disciplinary practices.

Organization of study

This study is organized in a chapter format with a total of five chapters. Chapter one will introduce the study and discuss the purpose, rationale, significance, limitations, and the research questions guiding the study. Chapter two will review the current research literature which provides the philosophical and empirical foundations for the
study. This literature will focus on school discipline practices, discipline disparities and research studies pertaining to student perceptions of disciplinary practices in schools. Chapter two will also discuss the theory of symbolic interactions as a means to better understand the disparities which exist in school discipline practices. Chapter three will discuss the design of the study, case study methodology and the specific instruments used in the data collection process.

Chapter four will present the result of the study based on the data collected from interviews, a hypothetical behavioral scenario, and a scale regarding student perceptions of school discipline. Participant observations will not be included in the data analysis, but are important because they give readers the opportunity to understand the role Tampa Bay Academy of Hope (TBAH) plays in the participants’ lives. The observations also share my experiences at TBAH with readers. Finally, chapter five will summarize the major finding in the study and discuss its significance and contributions to existing research on school discipline. Chapter five will also include recommendations for future research and a reflexive analysis.

Background

My interest in this topic began while completing my undergraduate degree in Special Education. During this time, I worked with an assistant professor, Dr. Brenda Townsend, whose research interests focused on the disproportionate number of African American students in certain special education programs. She recruited African
American male undergraduates interested in majoring in Special Education to participate in Project PILOT (Preparing Innovative Leaders of Tomorrow). Project PILOT was a federally funded grant which purposes were to recruit, train, and graduate African American male special educators who would teach in urban areas. Additionally, these young men would address issues regarding the excessive suspension, expulsion, and referral of African American students into programs such as emotionally handicapped and mental retardation. After graduation I began teaching middle school students with severe emotional disturbances and witnessed first hand how African American students were often mistreated in schools and disproportionately represented in certain special education programs. More importantly, these acts seemed to be acceptable in public education.

After teaching for three years I received an opportunity to study at the doctoral level and work as a research assistant on another of Dr. Townsend’s grants. Project LASER’s (Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources) goal was to train a diverse group scholars to conduct research on issues that affect urban schools. My initial research interests focused on disproportionality in Special Education and discipline practices in urban schools. As a requirement of LASER, I conducted applied research at a local inner-city middle school and worked with African American male students experiencing behavioral difficulties. We primarily discussed techniques they could use to resolve conflicts constructively with peers and teachers in hopes of reducing the amount
of discipline referrals they received. African Americans comprised 35 percent of the total population, yet accounted for 58 percent of all non-duplicated suspensions. Non-duplicated suspensions indicate students who have multiple suspensions which are counted once in the total number for the school. The experiences at this middle school reinforced the importance of conducting research in the area of school discipline practices.

While at the middle school I met students who had been continuously suspended since the first or second grade, often for behaviors that hardly seemed to merit being removed from school, such as excessive tardiness. I also spoke with teachers and administrators who confessed their awareness of the problem, as well as their uncertainty regarding effective solutions. Initially, I limited my interest to the disparities between African American and white students with regards to discipline and suspension. I was interested in determining whether or not there were disparities in office referrals and suspensions between African American and white students. However, the series of conversations with African American males helped me to expand my interest, resulting in my current focus on how these students experience and understand disparities in discipline practices.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to examine a selected group of African American male students’, identified as “at-risk”, experiences and beliefs about
disciplinary practices used in school. A secondary purpose is to consider student attribution with respect to the intentions of discipline policies and the implications of student experiences and beliefs for the focus, rationale, and administration of school-based discipline policies.

The need to focus on African Americans and males in particular is indicated by literature which suggests this group receives harsher punishment for similar infractions than any other ethnic group (Skiba, 2000). Townsend (2000), states that African American students who are suspended believe that they have poor relationships with their teachers. Suspension, therefore, is likely a matter of student-teacher relationships, in which existing school rules and teachers’ interpretation of those rules play a determinant role in the outcome of a rule violation. Students typically have little or no authority in determining the outcome or effect of a perceived violation. Attention to students’ experiences of their rule violating behavior in schools is lacking in our analyses of the nature, social meaning, and psychological effects of suspension. Interpretation of rules and behavior is mediated by values and personality that affect perceptions of experience. Consistent with this argument, the race and ethnicity of students of color who account for a disproportionate amount of the suspension statistics need to be investigated to determine these students’ perceptions of their experiences and, when it occurs, of suspensions. Many factors contribute to the negative experiences many African American males may perceive as customary in school. For example, some believe that
the shortage of African American teachers plays a key role in the negative outcomes of this particular group (Townsend, 2000). One author argues that this shortage points up a cultural divide that exists between contemporary African American students and their teachers (King, 1993 as cited in Townsend, 2000). Townsend states that this shortage limits students’ exposure to school professionals that can serve as role models and increases the likelihood that African American students will be taught by individuals with limited knowledge, experience and understanding of their cultural backgrounds. Therefore, related factors such as cultural conflicts, language and communication, and cultural discontinuity are also believed to contribute to the disproportionate discipline of African American male students.

With the literature on school discipline stating that African American males face less than positive experiences and outcomes in school, first-hand knowledge of how this group makes sense of these experiences will greatly contribute to our understanding of their perceptions of discipline practices in schools. We know from the literature on disproportionality that African American males are mistreated in many U.S. public schools. The use of suspension affects all students, but disproportionately impacts African American males, who make up 23 percent of the total student population and account for 53 percent of all suspensions (Bock et al., 1998). It has also been found that suspension rates for this same population is double that of the combined total of
Caucasian, Native American, and Hispanic American students (Sabatino et al., 1983 as cited Bock, 1998).

What has not been cited as much in the literature is how African American males perceive what happens to them in public schools. Understanding that disparate discipline practices occur is important, but it does not guarantee a solution for those affected by it. The perceptions of African American males must be examined for educators to really begin to understand the impact of disparate disciplinary practices. Examining this phenomenon qualitatively will enable school policy leaders to examine the kinds of issues required to create equity-based school environments for all students.

Significance

This study intends to share the experiences of five African American males who have been subjected to discriminatory practices in public schools. The intended audiences for this research are those interested in the inequities that exist in public schools. These may include, but are not limited to, in-service teachers, administrators, pre-service teachers, university faculty, parents, community agencies, school districts and others. The five case studies will provide readers with a glimpse into the realities of a select group of African American males. This study may also provide a better understanding of what it means for these five participants to be African American males in public schools. Believing that African American males are experiencing unfavorable outcomes in schools, especially with regards to being suspended and expelled, I am also
led to believe that this particular group of students’ school experiences is not conducive to producing citizens who feel as though life after formal education will offer them the same opportunities as their majority-culture peers.

The study will address multiple issues dealing with the manner in which African American males are disciplined in U.S. public schools. The use of literature on disparate discipline practices, current research/studies and the lived (school) experiences of five high school students will help shed light on this phenomenon. The experiences of these students will provide a snapshot of how some African American males view the disciplinary aspect of the educational experience. Their experiences are not intended to serve as a generalization of the experiences of all African American students.

This study will examine the issue of inequitable discipline practices that occur in schools daily, a reality discussed widely in the professional literature. By providing factual accounts of the “real life” school experiences of African American male students I hope to validate what research studies and literature on school discipline say about disparate practices. The experiences of African American males are being used because the literature tells us that this group is suspended and expelled more than any other group (Skiba, 2000). The ultimate goal of this study will be to inform education stakeholders and policy makers about the unique experiences that African American males have with disciplinary practices in our schools. Arguably, school-based discipline policies have
been based on a limited understanding of how students perceive and experience the principles guiding, and the administration of those policies.

Current research and professional literature suggests that little attention has been given to student concerns in this area. In order to have discipline policies that respect and reasonably consider students’ interests, we need research that examines student experiences and perceptions more deeply and personally. For example, we need to know how African American male high school students perceive disciplinary practices in schools. In addition, we need to know how they understand the principles guiding disciplinary policies and the administration of those policies, especially with respect to equity. It would also be important to understand how African American males experience and appropriate moral and social meaning to discipline practices in schools. Lastly, we need to know how this group psychologically and behaviorally cope with their discipline related experiences and expectations in schools.

In this study, I intend to explore inequitable school discipline practices through the lived experiences of five African American males, including their perceptions of equity in school discipline policies and their experiences, in this respect, of the moral integrity of school culture. The participants will be interviewed individually at a location to be determined later and the interviews will last approximately one hour. The interview data will reveal how these students perceive their disciplinary experiences in school. The study will also reveal whether or not the students understand, at some level, that African
American students tend to receive harsher consequences for less severe infractions (Skiba, 2002).

**Personal Perspective**

Primarily, three factors contribute to my interests in disproportionate discipline practices. These are my ethnicity, gender, and experiences as a student. These factors, combined with the issues African American males are facing in schools throughout the United States, play a major role in my continued interest in school discipline practices. My experiences as an African American male student are inconsistent with that of many students who share my gender and ethnicity. For the most part, my ethnicity and gender have not served as a barrier in regards to my educational experiences. When reflecting on my elementary and junior high years, I am able to look back on these times with great fondness. Although I attended suburban schools in which African Americans made up less than five percent, I do not recall being mistreated because of my ethnicity or gender.

Prior to seventh grade, I had never been taught by an African American. My relationships with my teachers in elementary were all positive and I have no recollection of being treated differently by teachers and administrators because of how I looked. Students were encouraged and affirmed by teachers and as a result, we worked hard to please them. During fourth grade my teacher met with my parents and requested that I be tested for the gifted program. By the end of the school year I had been tested and placed
in the gifted program at my school. Evidently, my teacher was able to look past my skin color and recognized that I had high academic aptitude.

In regards to discipline, I do not remember any major disciplinary incidents occurring during my schooling, such as students bringing guns to school. During elementary, I can only recall one student, who was a white male, being suspended for striking a coach. Beyond that, teachers handled discipline problems in their classrooms and rarely referred students to the principal’s office.

Once I entered junior high and high school I began having other African American and Latino students in my classes. These schools were more diverse as compared to my elementary school but were still predominantly white schools. Reflecting on those periods in my life has still not conjured up any feelings of unfair treatment toward students of color. This is not to say that it did not occur, but it was not consistently practiced in such an overt manner. For whatever reason, teachers seemed to use discipline referrals as a last resort instead of a primary recourse for handling behavior problems.

Having spent a great deal of time in schools as a teacher, researcher, and an administrator has raised some concerns regarding how discipline is used, especially with regards to African American students. I believe this research will help me to understand why my experiences as an African American student seem paradoxical to those of many African American males. I hope to understand whether these differences are a function
of the value assigned by teachers to African American or the expectations teachers have for these students. In addition, I hope to understand the psychological ramifications disparate discipline practices have had on a group of African American students who have them first-hand.
Chapter II

Literature review

School Discipline

The topic of school discipline is, at times, controversial and elicits much conversation and attention around the country. Over a decade ago, Brookover (1992) purported that this topic was very significant, especially when we speak of “out of control” students. It is important to remember that the topic of school discipline and its ensuing ramifications is larger than the number of students which may be classified as out of control.

The perceived lack of control of students is an issue that has garnered attention at the national level. The “get tough” attitude of many schools and district is becoming more prevalent across the country. The literature suggests that this type of attitude or practice, also referred to as zero tolerance, which supposedly treats every child the same through the utilization of standard practices does not provide support to all students (Gable, Hendrickson, Tonelson & Acker, 2000). Zero tolerance is a term used to describe a non-discretionary enforcement policy for formal and informal rules. Under a system of zero tolerance, persons in positions of authority who normally have the ability to use discretion when making judgments are instead compelled to act in particular ways and, where relevant, to impose a pre-determined punishment regardless of individual responsibility.
Many students do not receive the adequate support needed in schools because of the discipline system’s design. Tobin, Sugai and Colvin (2000) assert that most discipline systems are punishment oriented and exclusionary which result in teachers and administrators having difficulty responding to behavior problems in other ways. The authors also contend that this type of discipline does not work well for students who misbehave chronically and are unresponsive to current discipline practices.

Children spend a significant amount of their lives in school. If we consider that students are in school approximately 12,000 hours, it becomes easy to understand that much of what they learn about adulthood comes from their experiences in school. Students learn how to navigate through their world by interacting with those who teach and discipline them. Relating to others, problem solving, understanding limits and individuality are all concepts learned in the schooling process (Curwin & Mendler, 1988, p241). The lessons that students learn, whether positive or negative are long lasting and very influential in their development. As a result, the way student behavior is managed cannot be viewed simplistically because too much is at stake.

The literature on school discipline offers numerous articles and research studies that address the issue of discipline practices in schools. Within the last decade there has been an increasing amount of scholars and school district personnel that have written about discipline and more specifically, the discipline of specific populations of students such as African Americans. Many of these studies address the disparate disciplinary
practices that occur in many school districts across the nation. However, a void exists in the area of student perceptions and how they understand these disciplinary experiences in the larger context of their general school experiences.

This research aims to fill the void in the literature that does address the emotional ramifications of disproportionate discipline practices on African American male students. The manner in which most schools are structured place children in a situation in which they are on the receiving end of a rigidly structured educational process designed for groups of children to be instructed simultaneously. In order for educators to keep improving this system to meet the needs of all individual students, it is important to better understand how each cultural group perceives the educational experience. An effective means of gaining this information is to allow students to share their perceptions of the school experience and use this information to inform stakeholders and make improvements where necessary.

Disparities in Discipline

Cultural conflicts may exist between African American students’ culture and a school’s mainstream culture (Townsend, 2000). Therefore, it is important that teachers and administrators understand their biases and limitations so that they can equitably assist in resolving student-student and teacher-student conflicts. Concerns have been raised about the fairness of suspension referrals (Vanderslice, 1999). For example, we know from the literature that students who receive free school lunch are at an increased risk for
school suspension (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Moreover, it has been proven by
the Commission for Positive Change in Oakland Public Schools that suspension
disproportionately impacts African American males, who make up 23 percent of all
students but account for 53 percent of all suspensions (Bock, Tapscott, & Savner, 1998).
Since African American males make up less than 25 percent of the student population,
yet they represent over 50 percent of all suspensions in Oakland, there is reason to
suggest that African American males have been targeted as behaviorally and emotionally
challenged.

U.S. society has been long characterized by ignorance about African American
social styles, denigration of African American traditions, and persistent negative and fear
inducing media images of African Americans (Schwartz, 2001). As a result, teachers
may try to control African American learners, particularly males, more than European
American students, believing that there is a lack of discipline in their home (McCadden,
1998). When African Americans students “behave” in a manner that is affirmed by
dimensions of their culture and these behaviors are unfamiliar to or misinterpreted by
teachers, particularly those who do not share the same cultural practices, these students’
behaviors are often perceived as inappropriate (Webb-Johnson, 2003). Thus, it is
imperative that teachers gain knowledge and understanding of African American cultural
styles and preferences when planning and delivering instruction and considering
interventions.
Racial and cultural differences in the definition of good behavior, along with miscommunications, frequently lead to the inequitable punishment of students of color by school personnel (Schwartz, 2001). Furthermore, administrative decisions in dealing with inappropriate behaviors are frequently punitive, resulting in student suspension from school and/or placement in alternative settings (Daunic, Smith, & Robinson, 2000). According to Vanderslice (1999), most students are suspended for non-violent offenses such as non-compliance or disrespect. For example, “language used among many African American students may have meanings that appear to hold meanings opposite of their intent. Many girls talk using a unique style of communication that includes an animated and vehement manner that may come across as combative or argumentative to unfamiliar listeners (Townsend, 2000).” Another example involves African America males and females who talk in louder tones than students of mainstream culture. In fact, many African American students speak loudly and interrupt as a way of showing their interest, or even argue as they press their point (Schwartz, 2001). On the whole, African American verve or vitality may impose new challenges on teachers resulting in misperceptions of behavior, cognitive abilities and social interactions.

Managing students’ challenging behaviors effectively will continue to be a frustrating endeavor until teachers view misbehavior, particularly non-violent behavior, as an opportunity for increasing positive social interaction rather than being something to be punished (Maag, 2001). Suspension is used as a quick intervention that relieves the
classroom teacher of affectively intervening in a conflict in order to reduce and eliminate future behavior. Moreover, if the student does not express the cause of misconduct and solutions for future threats to reengage in similar acts are not conceptualized, the problem behavior that was suspended with the student will only return to class with the student. In short, the literature suggests that suspending and expelling students does not appear to deter for future misconduct therefore being an ineffective method for addressing misbehavior (Bock, Tapscott, & Savner, 1998).

Educators must become conscious of their behaviors with respect to ethnicity and gender. Before disciplining students, teachers and administrators should consider the reasons for their perceived misbehavior, particularly as they relate to racial differences between teachers and students (Schwartz, 2001). The lack of rules or policy and vagueness of guidelines for students inherently causes inequity and confusion (Bock, Tapscott, & Savner, 1998). School personnel must revisit rules and expectations that serve only to impose control over students’ lives’ as opposed to more meaningful codes that will influence students’ quality of life (Townsend, 2000).

According to Berger and Graham (1998), providing discipline, structure, and an intensive educational environment, in conjunction with counseling and frank discussions about the consequences of inappropriate behavior, students develop latent learning skills, increase self-esteem, and gain a new perspective toward school, their attitudes, and actions. Even more, a caring alternative to suspension promotes academic success,
encourages positive student-teacher and student-student relationships (Saunders, 2001). In order to reduce exclusionary discipline, school personnel can foster nurturing and caring relationships with all students, while especially attempting to connect with students who have histories of school, and other negative outcomes (Townsend, 2000).

The encouragement of parental involvement by schools can facilitate communication and enable parents to have a voice in school matters concerning their child(ren). Schools need to keep parents apprised of their children’s behavior, both positive and negative, so they can work together when improvement is needed (Schwartz, 2001). Therefore, schools must seek parent and community involvement, but first must examine their attitudes and beliefs towards African American parents and their communities (Townsend, 2000). African American families have expressed feelings of disenfranchisement when asked about their experience with schools’ discipline policies (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1999 in Webb-Johnson, 2003).

Analyzing disciplinary practices

Students of color, particularly African American students, have been subjected to disparate discipline practices for many years in American public schools. Throughout the country, it has been reported that school districts are disproportionately suspending African American students more than any other group based on their total percentage in the school population. Several studies have been conducted to address this phenomenon
and many of the results have indicated that a problem exists in regards to the discipline of African American students, particularly males.

This issue is not geographical and affects African American students all over the United States. For example, in Baltimore County African American students comprise less than 34 percent of the student body, but make up 54 percent of suspensions according to the Maryland Department of Education (Skiba, 2000). In this analysis of school disciplinary practices, Russell Skiba and colleagues analyzed discipline data for the entire school district and found that a disproportionate number of African American students were being suspended from schools. Skiba also provided his theory as to why these disparities exist. He states that racially biased discipline policies are threatening minorities’ access to education and educators must stop relying on popular one-size-fits-all discipline policies, which disadvantage students of color (Skiba, 2000).

In June of 2000, Russell Skiba, Robert Michael and Abra Nardo of the Indiana Education Policy Center and Reece Peterson of University of Nebraska-Lincoln released a policy research report about disproportionality in school discipline practices. The purpose of their investigation was to explore gender, racial and socioeconomic disparities in school discipline in sufficient detail to test alternative hypotheses concerning disproportionate school discipline (Skiba et al., 2000). The subjects in this study were middle school students from a large, urban mid-Western public school district. The district serves more than 50,000 students. The data were drawn from the disciplinary
records of all 11,001 students in 19 middle schools in the district for the 1994-1995 school year. Male students accounted for 51.8 percent (5,698) of the participants and females comprised the remaining 48.2 percent (5,303) of the participants in the study.

The majority of the student participants were categorized as black (56 percent) or white (42 percent). Latino students represented 1.2 percent, Asian students represented 0.7 percent and Native American students represented 0.1 percent of the participants. Out of all of the participants, 7,287 (65.3 percent) were eligible for free lunch and 2,923 (26.6 percent) were eligible for reduced lunch. The remaining 891 (8 percent) students were not eligible for either. All 19 middle schools were located in an urban setting and populations ranged from 400 to 800 students approximately.

Disciplinary data were drawn from an extant data collection system for recording disciplinary contacts in the district. When a discipline referral was submitted to any middle school office, the administrator receiving the referral filled out a standardized coding form. The data were scanned, organized and maintained in a central database by the research and data team for the district. Only the primary reason for the referral is included in the analyses and in terms of sanctions, only out-of-school suspensions and expulsions were analyzed in their investigation.

For this investigation, the data were aggregated so that the student became the unit of analysis. Disparities for gender, race and socioeconomic status were all explored in terms of number of office referrals, suspensions and expulsions. To analyze
disproportionality, two common methods of assessment were used. The first compares the baseline ethnic distribution in the population with the ethnic distribution in the category under study. The second method is the absolute proportion of a population being served in a category. The investigators also explored the extent to which disparities in discipline by race and gender can be explained by discrepancies in socioeconomic status. Free and reduced lunch status served as the proxy or stand-in variable for socioeconomic status, entered in a two-factor analysis of covariance predicting a number of disciplinary outcomes. Lastly, the investigators utilized discriminate analysis to explore the types of infractions that differentiate black and white referrals to the principal’s office. This type of analysis was useful because it is specifically designed to clarify relationships between response and grouping variables.

The investigators, applying the 10 percent of the population proportion criteria to their data (Reschly, 1997), found that males and black students were over-represented on all measures of school discipline (referrals, suspensions, and expulsions), while females and whites were under-represented on the same measures. Additionally, disproportionality increased as students moved from suspension to expulsion.

Male students were referred to the office more frequently for infractions ranging from minor offenses to sexual misconduct, while females were only referred more frequently for truancy. Additionally, African American students represented in this sample were referred to the office for infractions that were both less serious and more
subjective than white students (e.g. disrespect and loitering versus smoking and obscenity). With regards to socio-economics, the authors report students who receive free or reduced lunch as well as those with fathers who do not have full-time jobs are significantly more likely to be suspended than students who fail to meet these criteria.

The ERASE (Expose Racism and Advance School Excellence) Initiative in conjunction with the Applied Research Center has also conducted research in the area of discriminatory discipline policies and practices in public schools. This initiative, based out of Oakland, CA, is a national program that sets out to challenge racism in schools while simultaneously promoting racial justice and academic excellence for all students. The study, titled Profiled & Punished: How San Diego Schools Undermine Latino & African American Students, was published in 2002 and uses data from San Diego City School District as a case study.

More specifically, the report examines how the policies of the San Diego City School District result in inequitable educational opportunities. An example of this, as it relates to discipline, lies within the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions. The initiative found that in this district, Latino and African American students made up 53 percent of the total population, yet they accounted for 72 percent of all suspensions and 76 percent of all expulsions for the 2000-2001 academic year. The researchers go on to report that in the district, students of color are systematically punished disproportionate to their numbers and that in the 1999-2000 academic year, there were 11,839 suspensions
which is almost 10 percent of the total student population (140,743). The significance of this is that African Americans comprised 31 percent of the suspensions although they only represented 17 percent (23,300) of the total population.

The ERASE Initiative provided policy recommendations that focused on curtailing the disproportionate discipline practices occurring in San Diego City School District and California schools in general. The Initiative recommended that school districts:

1. Establish goals and benchmarks for success such as setting measurable, quantitative goals to reduce the overall number of suspensions and expulsions, and to eliminate disparities.

2. Create a challenging, respectful learning environment for all students as well as exploring proactive practices, instead of punitive policies, to minimize school disciplinary problems.

3. Institute new procedures to monitor discipline practices such as an approach to discipline that address core issues rather than punishing and excluding students.

To ensure success, schools need to systematically alter their cultures by breaking long-standing patterns of punishing students, not merely changing discipline policies and practices.
Student perceptions

Martin Ruck and Scot Wortley’s study (2002), examined perceptions of differential treatment relating to school disciplinary practices in a racially and ethnically diverse sample of high school students. The authors of this study assert that racial and ethnic minority students often face poorer educational outcomes in a variety of areas than do their mainstream counterparts. Also of primary concern with regard to their investigation is the fact that racial and ethnic minority students are more likely to be disciplined than white students. The investigators contend that the importance of examining students’ perceptions about issues faced in school should not be underestimated. They go on to state that how an individual perceives his or her environment may be more important than objective reality in that those perceptions influence how an individual responds to their environment.

The sample in this study includes African American, South Asian, Asian, white and other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Their sample includes 1870 students in grades 10 through 12 from 11 randomly selected schools in the metropolitan Toronto area of Ontario, Canada. There were a total of 2,487 students eligible to participate in the survey and the study had a response rate of 65 percent. Eleven percent of the students were not present when the survey was administered; nine percent of the students did not return consent forms and two percent refused to participate. The sample consists of 49 percent white, 18 percent Asian, 14 percent black, eight percent south Asian and 11 percent “other.”
The surveys focus on demographic information, perceptions of differential treatment, and general perceptions of the school environment. The investigators used a Likert scale that varied according to the survey question. With regards to perceptions of school discipline, a portion of the survey addresses student perceptions of differential treatment. Some of these items focus on school suspension and teacher treatment. There is also a section in the survey that addresses general perceptions of the school environment. An item in this section asks students about the severity of school punishment.

Results indicated that racial/ethnic minority students are much more likely than white students to perceive discrimination with respect to teacher treatment, school suspension, use of police by school authorities, and police treatment at school. More specifically, in the areas of differential treatment and general perceptions of school environment, African American students felt they were treated unfairly based on their race. These feelings were in comparison to all other ethnic groups represented in this study. Race and ethnicity emerged as the strongest predictors of perceptions of differential treatment.

The investigators acknowledge that there are limitations to the study such as the inherent problems with self-report data, but emphasize that if students perceive differential treatment, even if it does not exist, there will still be psychological effects on the reality of their schooling experience.
Symbolic Interactions

A means to understanding the disproportionate discipline of African American students, particularly males, might be related to our understanding of the interactions between teachers/administrators and this group of students. Students interact with teachers and administrators for the majority of the time they spend on a school campus. These interactions occur in classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, cafeterias, etc. For the most part, these are probably positive experiences for students, but there are times when these interactions are negative and have detrimental effects on students. Understanding these interactions could prove beneficial in understanding the discipline dilemma. These interactions and the ensuing reactions are undoubtedly important in the students’ processing of disciplinary encounters in school.

Looking at disproportionate discipline through a symbolic interactionist framework could prove useful in this study. Under this conceptual framework, the term interaction can be understood as the process consisting of the reciprocal actions of two or more actors (teachers and students) within a given context (Vrasidas, 1999). A key figure in the advancement of this theory is Herbert Blumer. Blumer (1969) thought that the formation of meaning for individuals was in the process of interactions. He went on to state that how others act with regards to the world influences the meaning of the world for the individual. The theory also emphasized that meaning is not inherent in behavior and symbols, but rather that individuals infuse these with meanings.
There are three core principles to Blumer’s seminal theory, which are meaning, language and thought. These principles lead to conclusions about the creation of a person’s self and socialization into a larger community (Griffin, 1997). Blumer’s first core principle of meaning states that humans act toward people and things based upon the meanings that they have given to those people or things. Symbolic Interactions holds this principle as central in human behavior. The second core principle is language, which gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. It is by engaging in speech acts with others (symbolic interaction) that humans come to identify meaning or naming and develop discourse. The third core principle is that of thought. Thought modifies each individual’s interpretation of symbols. The thought process, which is based on language, is the mental conversation or dialogue that requires role-taking or imagining different points of view.

Blumer’s first principle in this theory is that of meaning. In this principle, Blumer states that humans act towards people and things based on the meaning they give to them. If we look at this principle in the context of school disciplinary practices, it might help us better understand some of the dilemmas schools face. For example, research has shown that males are disciplined more harshly and frequently in schools more than females (Skiba, 2000), and within the male population African American males are disciplined even more compared to their representation in the total population (Skiba, 2002). We can also look at the manner in which African American males are portrayed in the media.
Television viewers are constantly bombarded with negative images of African American males committing crimes against their communities. With that being said, it is not difficult to believe that the meaning placed on African American males by teachers and administrators may be that of a group that is prone to causing disturbances and in need of strict disciplinary control. As a result, the tolerance level for African American males maybe considerably less than any other group.

Blumer’s second principle, language, builds upon the first principle. Blumer believes that language enables us to identify meaning and develop discourse. Undoubtedly, the meaning that we have given to people and objects heavily influences the language we use. Also, the language used during interaction with others can influence their perceptions about people or objects; hence influencing the meaning they assign people or objects as well as how they interact with them. The third principle, thought, can also be contingent upon the initial meaning assigned to an individual or object. It is through interpretation that humans are able to process the meaning of the world (Blumer, 1969). Individuals have internal dialogue that is based primarily on the original meaning that they have assigned. Whether the meaning is negative or positive, it will have an effect on the internal dialogue and consequently on the interactions which occur. These interactions are influential in the school experiences of students and their effects can last beyond formal schooling.
Chapter III

Method

Overview

This dissertation is the product of an exploratory study of African American male high school students’ experiences and beliefs about discipline practices in school. The primary purpose of this study is to examine a selected group of African American male students’, identified as “at-risk”, experiences and beliefs about disciplinary practices used in school. A secondary purpose is to consider student attribution with respect to the intentions of discipline policies and the implications of student experiences and beliefs for the focus, rationale and administration of school-based discipline policies.

A case study methodology was used to study five students who attended TBAH, a local nonprofit organization which specializes in providing educational and leadership training to students identified as “at-risk” for academic failure. In addition to the interview data, a hypothetical behavioral scenario and perception scale will offer additional information beyond those collected from the interviews.

This chapter provides information on case study research and a rationale for its use in this study. This chapter will also discuss the various data collection methods used in this study as well as the research site, participants and limitations. Data assembled from multiple viewpoints will provide a rich representation of the phenomena being examined (Denzin, 1970). In addition, Denzin states that presenting multiple sources of
evidence reduces single source bias in research. Multiple sources of evidence assist the researcher in achieving data triangulation and improving the trustworthiness of the findings.

The information gathered from these data sources enabled the researcher to answer the three research questions that guided the study:

1. How do African American male high school students come to understand and define the discipline practices at their school?
2. Do African American male high school students view the discipline policies at their school as fair and fairly administered to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status?
3. How do African American male high school students experience the realities of discipline practices administered by teachers and administration?

*Case Study*

Qualitative research concentrates on how individuals make sense of their world while interacting with others (Krueger, 1998; 2000). Qualitative research focuses on processes and descriptions, using the words of participants as part of the findings (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) asserts that with this type of research meaning is embedded in the experiences of people and this meaning is mediated by the perceptions of the investigator.
Case study method focuses on the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995). Stake divides case studies into those that are intrinsic, i.e., interested in the case itself, and those that are instrumental, i.e., interested in issues larger than the case itself. This study is considered instrumental because the focus is to understand racial and gender implications of school discipline practices from the perspectives of students who have personal experienced with these practices.

Generalizability and reliability are not the aim in case study research. Merriam (1995) asserts that reliability is problematic because human behavior is never static. A characteristic of the case study method is the descriptive component. This has been identified by Merriam (1998) as a “rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study that means the complete, literal description of the incident” (p.28). Case study research is not married to one form of data collection and a variety of methods can be utilized. In this study an interview, a hypothetical behavioral scenario and a perception scale are used to collect data.

Interviews

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) assert that the purpose of qualitative research is to discover answers to questions that focus on how social experience is created. Seidman (1998) states that at the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of others by the meaning they make of their experience. Seidman also believes that an
interest in the stories of others is an essential to quality interviewing research. There is a wealth of research conducted on schooling in the United States, but little is based on studies involving the perspectives of teacher, students, administrators and other stakeholders (Seidman, 1998). This research intends to understand an aspect of schooling from the perspective of a group directly involved with it, students.

The benefit of using an interview format is that it allows for maximum use of ideas, thoughts and memories in the participants’ own words as opposed to the words of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992). In an attempt to gain very specific information about the school experiences of the five participants, a semi-structured or focused interview format was used (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to describe, in detail, the experiences and beliefs expressed by the young men regarding disciplinary practices in schools. With this type of interview a researcher can introduce a topic and guide the discussion by asking specific questions.

Because the purpose of this study is exploratory and descriptive, inductive analysis will serve as an appropriate means to analyze the interview data. The inductive approach can aid in the understanding of meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes or categories from the raw data (Thomas, 2003). Inductive analysis will assist in the process of understanding how these students perceive their disciplinary experiences in school. The students were interviewed on an individual basis for approximately one hour and each interview was tape-recorded. Tape-recording
the interviews allowed for verification of verbatim transcriptions and other researchers to clarify and explore alternative interpretations of the data.

Each transcribed interview was categorized into units, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as unitization. Units are pieces of information that can stand alone because they are interpretable in the absence of any additional information. Also, a unit may be as simple as a sentence or as complex as an extended paragraph, but in any case, the test of its unitary character is that if any portion of the unit were to be removed, the remainder would compromised or unable to be interpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Once categorized, the search for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts in the categorized units began. The connection among the categories are referred to as themes and presented and commented upon in connection with the research questions (Seidman, 1998).

The following questions will be used to explore the experiences of the five students as well as answer the broader questions listed above.

1. What disciplinary practices have you experienced and what were the circumstances surrounding the situation?
2. How was the punishment administered?
3. Was there any indication of forgiveness?
4. Is there someone in the school you can talk to about your feelings? If not, whom can/do you talk to?
5. Explain the school’s discipline policy.
6. What do you believe about the principles guiding discipline policies?

7. What kinds of behaviors lead to suspension?

8. Is the discipline system in the school fair or unfair?

9. Do all teachers/administrators react to certain behaviors in the same way? (e.g. loud talking or fighting) Give some examples.

10. When you think about being disciplined, what teacher or administrator comes to mind? Why?

11. Are you treated differently because of your ethnicity? Why?

12. Are you treated differently because of your gender? Why?

13. Have you been labeled as a result of your disciplinary encounters?

14. Has your reputation been tarnished because of your disciplinary encounters?

15. Do you feel that the disciplinary experiences you have had will affect you after you graduate?

Questions one through four ask respondents about their general experiences with discipline policies, while questions five through nine ask about perceptions and understanding of school discipline practices and procedures. Issues of racial and gender equity are covered in questions ten through fourteen and question fifteen asks about effects after graduation.
### Table 1 – Alignment of Research Questions with Perception Scale and Interview Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Perception scale</th>
<th>Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do African American male high school students come to understand and define the discipline practices at their school?</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,6 and 13</td>
<td>5,6,7,8 and 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do African American male high school students view the discipline policies at their school as fair and fairly administered to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status?</td>
<td>5,11,12 and 14</td>
<td>10,11,12,13, and 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do African American male high school students experience the realities of discipline practices administered by teachers and administration?</td>
<td>7,8,9,10 and 15</td>
<td>1,2,3, and 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process of conducting the interviews was similar among the five participants. Each interview was conducted away from the TBAH offices in an effort to make the sessions convenient for the participants and their parents. Three of the interviews were conducted in the participant’s home, one was conducted at an Alternative to Out-of-School Suspension (ATOSS) site and the last was conducted at a local public library. The time spent conducting participant observations was an integral part of the relationship building process. As a result, all five sets of parents and participants were comfortable with me conducting interviews in their homes, although schedules only permitted three.

The interviews served as bonding periods as well. The conversations were, at times, serious, humorous, personal and always reflective. Additional conversations were held with each participant when questions arose regarding statements made in the initial
interview. Fortunately, the young men were very clear and concise with their responses so the need for further clarification was minimal.

_Hypothetical Behavioral Scenario_

A supplementary component to the interviews involves the use of a hypothetical behavioral scenario dealing with a specific rule violation. The scenario is a hypothetical behavioral infraction that could occur at any high school in the country. The scenario could be based on actual experiences or be fictitious. The purpose of this activity is to determine if the participants recognize that some students receive harsher consequences for the same or similar offenses because of their ethnicity.

The scenario was adapted from a textbook, *Managing Classroom Behavior: A Reflective Case-Based Approach* (Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, & Hallahan, 2002) which included teaching cases used with pre-service teachers. The scenarios provided participants with a description of a plausible infraction that could be categorized under one of the more subjective disciplinary categories such as disorderly conduct, insubordination or disrespect. Each participant was given the option of listening to an audio recorded version of the scenario or reading a script that was available. All five participants chose to read the script and complied when asked to read it aloud.

Participants were given the opportunity to respond to the actions of the adults and students and comment on how they would have responded to the situation presented in the scenario.
The responses were analyzed for themes that may have reoccurred among the participants. As with the interview data, there was a search for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts in the categories. The connections were referred to as themes and presented and commented upon in connection with the research questions (Seidman, 1998).

**Instrument**

A scale measuring students’ perceptions of discipline practices in school was included in the study. The purpose of the instrument was to determine the level of understanding of current discipline practices and perceptions of their effectiveness from the perspective of a student. The survey, developed by McMasters (2002), was originally developed for middle school students, but the items in the survey are also appropriate for high school students.

The survey utilized a five point Likert scale, with one representing total disagreement and five representing total agreement. It has a total of 20 items, but for the purposes of this study only 14 were used, not including two of the three demographic questions. Items (1, 3, 6, 8, 10, and 16) from the original survey were not included because they inquired about a specific behavioral program with which the students in McMaster’s study were familiar. Items 15 and 17 made reference to the behavioral program, but are still general enough to be used in this study. A frequency table is provided (p.75) in order to conduct an item analysis. The table will display relative
frequencies which are the proportion of responses in each category. This will allow for the analysis of participant responses for each item or specific items.

Research Site

A relationship was developed with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope (TBAH), a non-profit organization that focuses on developing young leaders by providing students with mentors and activities that promote leadership. TBAH is a community-based organization that teaches young people the skills to overcome the effects of poverty, violence, and negative life influences. In addition, the organization assists youth with leadership training, counseling, referrals, mentoring, job placement and scholarship development.

TBAH utilizes a Leadership through Education model to help youth from disenfranchised backgrounds experience success. By using this model, TBAH is able to provide the framework and foundation for innovative programs that empower youth to become self-sufficient. TBAH serves “at-risk” youth and parents who reside in Hillsborough County, Florida, particularly those living in economically depressed areas. TBAH and its primary partner, the School District of Hillsborough County, identify youth who participate. The criteria for enrolling students are:

1. must be 12 to 18 years of age
2. must be in grade six through twelve
3. must reside within the enterprise zone/community zone
4. must have been determined to be at-risk of academic failure or early school dropout

5. must be living at or below household poverty level (according to federal guidelines)

6. must have a history of misbehavior and/or misconduct

7. must be enrolled in one of four inner-city schools.

The outreach, recruitment and selection process culminates with the annual three-day Skills of Hope Leadership Conference. The conference accommodates over 250 youth and 100 adult mentors and offers students life building skills, leadership skills, anger management skills, goal-setting techniques and tips to increase self-esteem. Including participants from TBAH insures that they will have had a history of experience with school disciplinary policies.

Participants

The selection of participants occurred through purposeful sampling because it is crucial to seek out interviewees who meet the criteria for the researcher. The criteria for participating in this study consisted of the students 1) being African American males, 2) receiving at least one disciplinary referral to the dean’s office in the current or previous school year, and 3) having been suspended at least once since entering high school. Demographic information such as grade point average (GPA), number of referrals for discipline and discipline type was provided by TBAH. There were a total of eight young
men who wished to participate in the study. All eight students met the requirements for participation in this research. The final selection was based on the first five parents who agreed to allow me to meet with their son at least twice. At the time of this study each young man was participating in the TBAH youth leadership program.

Participant observation

Creswell (1998), states that participant observation allows the researcher to be immersed in the day-to-day lives of the participant(s). This immersion helps contextualize the experiences of the participants outside of school and gives insight into the role of TBAH in their lives. The observations are important because they allowed the researcher to get to know the people being studied by entering their world and participating openly in that world. Equally important was becoming familiar with TBAH and learning more about the services it provides to students and their families.

In exchange for utilizing TBAH as a research site, the director asked me to participate in several activities they sponsored. I participated in TBAH’s annual Youth Leadership Conference, a workshop on completing college applications and essays, and I was scheduled to attend a statewide college tour of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). At the conference, I worked at the registration table and passed out and collected surveys created by TBAH. During the workshop, I assisted seniors with the college application process and provided them with feedback on their essays. I
was scheduled to serve as a chaperone on the tour of HBCUs, but the trip was canceled and I never received information regarding the rescheduling of the trip.

In this study, the observations help contextualize the relationship between the five participants and the TBAH. It would be unfortunate if readers came away from this with the impression that TBAH gives some form of a “hand-out” to the poor and disadvantaged. Hopefully, the observations will enable readers to understand that TBAH is a resource to its community. Families have high expectations of TBAH and the organization expects the same of its families. The observation notes will offer readers a glimpse into the relationship between TBAH and the families it serves.

Limitations

The number of participants (5) is the primary limitation in this study. A sample size such as this can limit the amount of variability among the participants and, in this study, the demographic similarities of the participants is a limitation. Another limitation is the absence of observations in the school setting. Considering that the participants are reflecting on experiences in schools, observations in this setting would have been beneficial. The primary reasons for excluding observations in the school setting were access and time. Access would have had to been granted first by the school district and then by each of the three schools attended by the participants. I had a preexisting relationship with TBAH through my LASER Doctoral Fellowship and because my research was closely aligned with certain aspects of TBAH’s program, I was instantly
granted access. Nevertheless, the exclusion of observations in the school setting should not impede their ability to communicate their experiences and perceptions.
Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine a selected group of African American male students’, identified as “at-risk”, experiences and beliefs about disciplinary practices used in school. A secondary purpose is to consider student attributions with respect to the intentions of discipline policies and the implications of student experiences and beliefs for the focus, rationale and administration of school-based discipline policies.

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings related to each of the three research questions guiding the study:

1. How do African American male high school students come to understand and define the discipline practices at their school?

2. Do African American male high school students view the discipline policies at their school as fair and fairly administered to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status?

3. How do African American male high school students experience the realities of discipline practices administered by teachers and administration?

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section briefly discusses participant observations conducted at TBAH. The second section introduces the
participants with demographic information and a chronicle of the interview experience. An aggregated descriptive analysis based on the three research questions is presented in the third section. In section three, each research question will be addressed using data collected from the interviews, perception scale and hypothetical behavioral scenarios.

Participant Observations

Spending time at TBAH introduced me to the experiences of the participants outside of school and gave insight into the role of TBAH in their lives. The observations are important because they allowed for the development of a relationship with the five participants being studied by entering their world and participating openly in that world. Equally important to getting to know the students was becoming familiar with TBAH and learning more about the services it provides to students and their families. It is important to reiterate that in this study the observations are used to help contextualize the relationship among the five participants and TBAH rather than answering the research questions.

TBAH is an extension of the community it serves and goes to the community rather than having the community coming to it. The building which serves as the main office is very modest and rests at the end of a plaza with a barber shop, hair products store, and a real estate agency. Across the street from the office sits a gas station, fast food restaurant and housing projects. TBAH is located in what many African Americans affectionately refer to as the “hood,” or predominantly black neighborhood.
When you enter the office the open floor plan is shared by the director and three to four employees. Each person has a desk with computer and printer and there are grey metal shelves with books and videos which are available to purchase. Even if they wanted to hold a workshop or community meeting there the lack of space would not permit. This is where the partnership between TBAH, YMCA, the school district and many other businesses becomes essential to their vision. They are able to utilize space at the YMCA, different school auditoriums and conference rooms at hotels when they need to meet with large groups. I conducted three participant observations with the organization. These observations afforded me the opportunity to understand the role of TBAH, present my research interest, solicit participants for the study and engage in conversations with students regarding their future plans. The following are recounts of the three visits made to TBAH.

First Observation
November 6, 2004

The director and I had a conversation about my research and my interest in soliciting male participants for my research from the program. She suggested that I participate in their workshop at a local YMCA. The workshop was to last from 2p.m. until 5p.m.

I presented my research to approximately 30 parents from 2-3pm. The discussion centered on my interests in discipline practices in schools.
as they pertain to African American males. After presenting my power-
point presentation, parents had the opportunity to ask questions about the
study. At the end of the session I had eight parents express interest in
having their sons participate in the study. At that point I explained the
consent process and the details of the data collection process. I also had
each parent submit their contact information.

From 3:15 to 3:45 I spoke with a smaller group of eight parents
who were interested in their sons’ participating in the study. They used
this opportunity to voice their concerns about the manner in which schools
deal with African American students. A parent asked me if I was going to
share the information I received from the students with the school district.
I told the parent that I would share the information with anyone interested
in my research, but not at the risk of causing problems for any students.

Also during this time parents were registering for summer
programs. The YMCA and TBAH were providing scholarships for
students to participate in the summer camp offered at the YMCA. Both
sign-up sheets were full with families interested in the summer program.

From 4-5pm I spoke with a group of 40 students, all of whom
participate in TBAH. The group consisted of male and female students
and we discussed their positive and negative school experiences. I
requested that each student stand and introduce himself or herself by stating their name, grade and favorite subject in school. Surprisingly enough, none of the students were timid and were more than willing to share their experiences. The students were very candid in their descriptions of their disciplinary experiences and debated with one another about their responsibility as students to behave. We also discussed their post-school plans and what they need to do to be accepted into college.

After the session with the students, I asked if any males were interested in participating in the study. Some of the female students were disappointed because they had similar stories to share. I met with nine male students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years old. I had already spoken with the parents of five of the male students who were interested in participating in the study.

Second Observation
November 20, 2004

This evening was dedicated to helping high school students, specifically juniors and seniors prepare for SAT and ACT exams and assist them in completing college applications and essays. The session was supposed to last from 5 to 7 p.m. but there was miscommunication
between the staff and the session was canceled. The staff members had what appeared to be an impromptu meeting to reschedule the workshop for the students. The director wanted to know why she had been “out of the loop” on the change in schedule. A staff member informed her that several parents had called and stated that their child had some prior obligation so it was determined that the meeting needed to be canceled. The staff, with calendars in hand, tried to determine another date for the workshop. After their meeting they immediately began calling those parents of students who were supposed to attend on that evening to inform them that the workshop had been rescheduled for another date. The director apologized for the confusion and invited me to participate in the next workshop scheduled for December.

Third Observation
December 4, 2004

I arrived at the YMCA at 12:50 p.m. and met with a TBAH staff member and discussed the schedule for the two hours we would be together. One room would have middle school students with teachers from local school tutoring them in any subject area they were having difficulty. A second room was for high school age students who were preparing to take either the SAT or ACT exams in the near future. There were also local teachers in this room assisting students, specifically in math. I was informed that at 2 p.m. a special
guest was coming to talk to all of the male students only about school, drugs, sex, etc. I asked if I could sit in on the session and the staff member agreed.

From 1:00 to 1:30 I sat in on the session with the middle school students. Some were working independently and others were working in small groups. The majority of them were working on math related skills. The teachers circulated through the room and assisted the students as necessary. There was some giggling but, for the most part, the students were working diligently on their assignment and inappropriate behavior did not appear to be an issue. Around 1:35 I walked over to the room with the high school students. One of the teachers was talking with them about the importance of writing a well thought out essay to accompany their college applications. The students were very attentive and were asking questions about choosing topics and formats for the essays. In between questions the students talked to one another, but none of them appeared to be off topic.

The male students were called out of each room around 2:00 and reported to what appeared to be a multi-purpose room. All of the students were asked to form a large circle with the chairs in preparation for the guest speaker, who was a minister and community activist. The “rap” session, as they called it, began with introductions. The founder of TBAH and a male staff member served as the facilitators of the session. I also sat in the circle and was eager to hear about the experiences of these young men. After the
introductions, the guest speaker began the conversation by asking the students about their future career goals. Of course there were a couple who planned on being professional athletes, but the majority of this group of 15 young men talked about professional careers such as law, engineering and technology. The group also had a very frank discussion about sex and relationships with females. This is when some of the older students shared their experiences and gave advice to younger students. Naturally, the middle school students were embarrassed but seemed to take heed to the older students’ suggestions of focusing on their academics as opposed to girls. The rap session ended with affirmations, hugs and hand shakes. I believe that more students need to participate and hoped that this was replicated with the female students and staff.

The issue of having a gatekeeper and deciding on whether to be a covert or an overt participant observer never surfaced. TBAH opened its doors and provided access to parents and students and only requested a commitment to help students who do not have all of the advantages necessary to be successful. This community-based organization teaches young people the skills to overcome the effects of poverty, violence and negative life influences. TBAH utilizes a Leadership through Education model to help youth from disenfranchised backgrounds experience success. By using this model, TBAH is able to provide the framework and foundation for innovative programs that empower youth to become self-sufficient. With the support of community business partners, TBAH is
making a difference in the lives of “at-risk” children and equipping them with the tools to become successful and productive citizens.

It was beneficial to see the five participants interact with their peers and adults outside of the school context. There was an opportunity to observe whether these young men encountered the same conflicts with adults and peers in the community, or at least within the context of TBAH. Although the organization is not a school there are some similarities with regards to the structure of programs, their requirements for student participation, and the overall emphasis on education. The expectations the participants face in school mirror those at TBAH. For example, in both settings the participants are expected to be respectful towards adults and peers, restrain from being verbally or physically aggressive, and to complete tasks assigned to them. The young men demonstrated their ability to meet these expectations. A component of TBAH involves staff members visiting schools and discussing academic and behavior issues with teachers and administrators. Staff was aware of the discipline problems and partnered with schools to assist students when necessary, but participants in this study did not spend time reflecting on and sharing their perceptions of disciplinary experiences at TBAH.

It was clear during this process that the participants and their families place high value on education. The young men were committed to working hard in school and preparing themselves for the future. At the same time, they also understood that
inequities existed in school and it was up to them not to allow these inequities to
determine how successful they were.

Participant Demographics

This section provides a description of the participants and their perspectives on
school, relationships with adults and discipline policies and procedures. Physical
descriptions of the participants, personal facts and the setting in which the interviews
occurred are also included. The purpose of this section is to introduce the participants to
readers. Table 2 provides the name, age, grade level, and grade point average for each
participant.

Table 2 – Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dale</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Chris</td>
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Dale

Dale is a junior in high school and desires to play football which will hopefully
earn him a scholarship. He is about 5’8 with a very athletic build and a dark complexion.
When I arrived at his home, at 8 o’clock on a Saturday morning, I did not know what to
expect. I was fearful that Dale would not be very talkative so early on a Saturday. I
would have chosen a later time, but his family was going to be gone for most of the day.
Before I entered I decided that I would use sports or music as an icebreaker and prayed
he was interested in one of these topics. Dale’s mother answered the door, invited me in and introduced me to her boyfriend. By that time Dale had surfaced from his room, bright-eyed and apparently ready for our session. He had on a white tank top, basketball style shorts and white socks. Since it was so early, I assumed that these were his pajamas and, if he was comfortable, I was comfortable. Although it was an early Saturday morning, I still hoped Dale would open up and share his experiences with me. Fortunately, he exceeded my expectations and spoke candidly about his disciplinary experiences.

We talked about sports initially and he expressed his affection for football. Dale was very interested in playing high school football, although he was not currently on his school’s team. He asked me several times if I knew the coach at his school and if I could “put in a good word” for him. We spent approximately ten minutes discussing sports and then proceeded to begin the interview. Dale seemed very anxious as we discussed my purpose for interviewing him and uttered several times that no one had ever asked him about his experiences before, except for his mom. Since entering high school, Dale has been suspended three to five times. He currently holds a 1.9 grade point average which he attributed to changing high schools and being absent due to his suspensions. His grades and behavior also contributed to him not being a member of the football team.

The initial question Dale was asked dealt with his personal experiences with disciplinary practices and the circumstances surrounding the situation.
“It was one time I had got into a fight and got suspended for 10 days but I wasn’t sure why I got 10 days because it was a fight yesterday and those people got 5 days and both people threw a punch. The person I fought did not hit me back so they didn’t get suspended”

Dale felt that he was treated unfairly because he had committed the same offense as other students but received a harsher consequence. He expressed that some aspects of his school’s discipline policy were fair and others were unfair.

“Some points is fair and others I don’t think is fair. Like with the tardies I think its fair because I don’t have a lot of tardies I always get to class and I can’t remember the last time I skipped. What’s unfair is the unexcused absences cause they don’t work with you or call you down to ask why are you being absent so much you get in trouble and I think they get a kick out of it. I think a referral put an extra dollar in their paycheck. “

Although he appeared to be joking about the extra dollar for writing referrals, he was very concerned as to why teachers and administrators did not work with students they recognized as having some type of discipline problem. Dale really believed that certain adults did not have students’ best interest in mind and that, to a certain degree, they got some form of pleasure by seeing certain students not being successful. He believed that being an African American male plays a role in the way he is treated by
certain teachers. Dale has been involved in incidents in which he believes the color of his skin caused him to be unjustly reprimanded.

“My P.E. coach wrote me up for skipping and he had wrote me a pass to help the custodian and I come back he wrote me up and a white boy came with me and he didn’t say nothing to him, he went back in and lifted weights. He took the referral back because he knew he was wrong, but he ain’t say nothing to the other boy, he just questioned me.”

Dale stated that the assistant principal (AP) at his school, who is also African American, was the reason he was able to deal with some difficult situations in school. He admitted that the AP was stricter with males than females and believed that the AP genuinely cared about the students. He spoke about an incident he was involved in with a female student in which he felt the AP was supportive.

“It was this girl talking about my momma and then she said she was going to rip my “stuff” off so I had slapped her. She told the AP and he handled it and I got 2 days. Then I come back to school and she running at the mouth again and I told him. It was like the last week of school and she caught 5 days quick because he told her it was over with and she brought the situation up again”

Dale was worried because the AP he saw as a support had recently moved to another school. He was trying to encourage his mother to transfer him to a different
school so that he could start with a clean slate. He honestly believed that if he did not transfer schools that he would continue to have disciplinary problems at his current school. He knew that there were incidents in which he was at fault and he accepted the responsibility for his actions. Dale did not appear to be angry at anyone or placing blame, but was concerned that he was treated differently, especially when discipline was involved.

**Ray**

Ray is a freshman who enjoys playing video games and his advanced History class. When I met him I did not believe that he was a teenager or a high school freshman. At first glance he appeared to be in seventh or eighth grade, but definitely not high school. He was short and thin, and had a very pleasant smile. He lived with his mother, a paraprofessional with the school district, and an older and younger brother. They were in the process of moving either to another apartment or out of the state because his mother was unhappy with her current living situation.

The interview took place on the stairs outside of the apartment complex he lived in because his mom was not home at the time. She knew I was coming to see Ray and had given him permission to let me in, but I did not feel comfortable entering their home without an adult being present. Ray’s younger brother sat in on the conversation, but was very courteous and did not interrupt us as we discussed Ray’s school experiences. After the completion of the interview, Ray’s older brother came home with their mother and
asked what we were doing. After he learned of the topic he said that he had some good stories to tell about his experiences. At the time of the interview Ray had a 2.0 grade point average and was trying really hard to bring his grades up. His goal was to finish the year with at least a 2.5.

The conversation with Ray began with a question about his personal experiences with disciplinary practices at his high school. Ray chose to discuss an experience he was currently dealing with. During the time of the interview Ray was out of school on a five day suspension.

“On the bus the lady split us up, called my friend four eyes and told me to sit between two fat boys, it was already two people in the seat and she wanted me to sit between them and there was no room. I told her I wasn’t moving so when it was time to transfer she wouldn’t let me off the bus and she pushed me and tried to slang me in the seat so I did the same thing back”

On top of the five days out of school, he received an additional five day suspension off the bus. Ray felt that certain aspects of the discipline system at his school were unfair especially when it involved physical contact between students.

“It’s unfair b/c it’s defending your self cause if they hit you first you got a right to hit them back you shouldn’t get in trouble”
Although Ray had received harsh consequences for his behavior, he did not object to all of his school’s discipline policies. For example, he believed the manner in which the school handled issues such as tardiness was reasonable.

“If you get three or more you go to after school detention from 2:30 until 5:00 you sit in the class and do your work, you can’t sleep or talk. Yeah, it’s fair because you won’t get suspended”

Ray also believed that he has been targeted because he is an African American male. He complained that he felt that he was often disciplined for no reason, although many students make similar claims. He differentiated his disciplinary experiences from other students who are not African American by the amount of time he was suspended from school. He understood that he had made bad choices, but he did not understand why he would receive more days of suspension than other students for similar offenses.

“Yeah like when I was in sixth grade this white boy thought I stole his pencil so he pushed me in the corner and tried to swing on me and missed and I hit him and he started bleeding, he tried to hit me again so I had boomed him and so they suspended me for three days and they didn’t suspend him. I told them he pushed me and he didn’t get nothing”

In addition to Ray feeling that he was treated differently because of his ethnicity, he also felt that there was no one at school he could talk to. He stated that he talks to his friends about issues but none of the adults at his school.
The interview with Sam was conducted at the public library a few blocks from his home. He looks like a basketball player standing 6’2” tall with a lean physique. I later learned that Sam was not involved in sports on any level. He was much more focused on his academics and his part-time job. Sam was very well groomed and was on his way to the barber shop after our session. He lives with his mother and two younger siblings. In his spare time he enjoys being with his family and friends. At the time of the interview, Sam was sixteen and a junior maintaining a 3.0 gpa with two honors classes. He has a part-time job at a movie theater which he enjoys. Since entering high school, Sam has only been in trouble once and appears to be a studious individual, serious about school.

When asked about disciplinary practices he had experienced and the circumstances surrounding the situation, he spoke of the one incident he had been involved in.

“I got a pass to go to the library and my other teacher saw me and got mad.”

Sam believes that the teacher who saw him out of class assumed he was skipping and sent him to the assistant principal’s office. He was given in-school suspension, but the punishment was rescinded after the teacher who gave him a pass to the library vouched for his whereabouts. Notwithstanding that situation, Sam still believes that the discipline policies and procedures in school are fair. He believes that each student has to
hold themselves personally accountable for their actions and face the consequences when they break rules.

“It’s [rules] pretty fair. They [students] shouldn’t do things to get into trouble; rules are made to be followed.”

What he did not believe is that he is treated differently because of his ethnicity. Sam felt that the incident with the teacher accusing him of skipping was more her being “out to get him” as oppose to him being African American. When any issue arises Sam feels comfortable going to an assistant principal to talk. He also talks with his mother, whom he says is “relaxed when things happen in school.”

Bert

I interviewed Bert, who has since graduated from high school, at an Alternative to Out of School Suspension (ATOSS) site. These sites are designed for students who have been suspended out of school to attend so they can receive credit in school. Parents must provide transportation for this optional program and the rules are very strict. The site was equipped with two instructors and an off-duty law enforcement officer. When I arrived Bert was working on geometry, which happened to be the class in which he was having a lot of behavior problems. He estimated that he had been suspended twice since he began his senior year, mainly for disruptive behavior.

Bert was average height and was dressed well. He had his hair braided in unusual geometrical designs and it was obvious that he took pride in his appearance. Before his
senior year, he had been a standout point guard on his school’s basketball team, but continuous discipline problems and a decline in his grades had earned him a spot among the spectators. He understood that his chances of playing basketball this year was unlikely, so he focused on improving his behavior and academics.

As the interview began, I asked Bert to discuss an incident in which he had been disciplined.

“One time I got kicked out of class for laughing with other students and got sent to the office and suspended for 3 days, I was in class it wasn’t my fault the girl was already in trouble and the principal was coming and I was laughing at the girl getting in trouble so when the principal came the teacher told all of us to go with him. He said he was going to send all of us home, it was about five of us”

Overall, Bert believes the discipline system is fair especially with certain issues.

“As far as the dress code people should already know what to wear to school; fighting and cussing at the teachers, stuff you know when you’ll do it you gone get in trouble”

There are aspects of it that he dislikes. His major complaint is the lack of voice he feel that he has when it involves him being disciplined. Bert felt that this incident was unfair and that three days out of school was excessive for laughing.

“Mostly it’s [discipline system] fair but at my school they don’t take time to listen to the whole story and find out what happened they just…like when I got kicked
out of class for laughing the teacher added more stuff like I was disrupting class, I’m the class clown and whatever I do I get others to follow so in the office they read this and said the teacher wouldn’t lie. If the teacher said you did something they take they word they don’t ask other people in the class that didn’t get in trouble, they say they do but they never do”

Bert felt that many of the troubles he has encountered in school are because he is an African American and a male. He assumed responsibility for the mistakes he made and accepted the consequences, but he could not help but think that the way he looks play a role in how he is treated. In regards to the relationship between his disciplinary experiences and ethnicity he discussed an encounter in which a white female committed a similar offense and received a lesser punishment.

” In general cause I had witnessed it cause I was in the office and me and this girl got in trouble for the same thing and she got 2 days ISS and I got 5 days OSS. It was two different situations but the referrals had the same thing written on them. Did you see what was written on her referral? Yeah they were on the table and hers said disrupting the class and she told me what she was written up for. What was her ethnicity? She was white. I asked her what she did in class and it was the same thing I did and she only got 2 days ISS”

There is the possibility that Bert did not understand that school administrators take a student’s discipline history into account when punishment is given. Maybe this young
lady had no previous discipline problems, but in Bert’s eyes if they committed the same
offense the punishment should also be the same.

For Bert, being a male also played a key role in his discipline experiences. He
believes there are many assumptions made about him because he is a male. This notion
is not new to education and most educators would probably agree that there are certain
behavioral expectations associated with male students. At some level Bert understands
this and believes that he has been stereotyped because of his gender.

"First like if I’m in the hallway it seem like when I come down the hallway it can
be several girls and me and they ask me if I have a pass like I suppose to be
skipping....they probably say that since I’m a black male that’s out of class I must
be up to something or getting into something”

Bert’s immediate goals were to improve his grade in Geometry and graduate on-time
from high school. Not only did he accomplish those goals, he was also voted turn-
around-student of the year from his school. I had the privilege to attend and sit with his
family on this special occasion.

Chris

Chris is about 5’11 220 lbs and plays defensive tackle on his school’s varsity
football team. He is only a junior, but already has established himself as one of the most
dominant players in the area. He has received dozens of letters from universities such as
Clemson and Florida State encouraging him to consider their football programs and
offering athletic scholarships. The most accurate way to describe Chris is huge. He has an athletic, muscular build and is an intimidating presence when surrounded by his peers. Although he is only seventeen, he has a full goatee and could easily be mistaken for a college student. Chris said he likes to look “clean” and is not into the dreadlocks and braids; he prefers to keep a neat tapered haircut.

As physically intimidating as Chris is, he could also be described as a gentle giant. He described himself as popular and the type of person who can get along with anyone. Growing up, he was often teased about his weight but as he got older and began playing sports the jeers became cheers. Chris has had his share of discipline problems in schools. He believes that he is targeted at times because he is an athlete as opposed to being an honor student. He is maintaining a 2.7 gpa and has worked hard to remain academically eligible for football. Chris also worked hard because his mother told him that if he fails a class or falls below a 2.0 gpa he could no longer play football.

Since entering high school he has been suspended twice, once in the ninth and once in the tenth grade. He believes that football has helped him to focus on his academics and behavior, especially his behavior. Chris discussed the incident that earned him a suspension in his freshman year.

“I was in Algebra class with some of my homeboys from the team and we were talking about practice yesterday, all of a sudden the teacher started yelling saying we were disrupting the class ever day and she was tired of it. So then she buzzed
the office for an AP to come remove us. I think coach talked to her and the AP and we ended up getting two days ISS. That was good because we didn’t have to miss practice and get zeros."

Chris believed that the only reason he and his friends were disciplined is because they played football. He felt this way because he claims other students were talking, walking around the classroom and being disruptive and that this is normal in that particular class.

“She’s a good teacher, but she let students run all over her. She’ll be nice and then the next thing you know she writing you up and that ain’t fair. Sometime it seems like all the teachers and administrators act like that.”

Chris knew that the way he looked also contributed to many of the discipline issues he has faced in school. In Chris’ mind, because he is a star athlete and black, he walks around with a bulls-eye on his back.

“At my school, the black football and basketball players are always having problems. I can do the same thing as a white person, but they [adults] always make a big deal out of it. My momma has been up here three times to talk to my AP about how I get treated.”

Chris especially had a great deal to say regarding being a male in his school and how boys and girls are treated. He felt that female students can get away with more because people expect males to misbehave and they are looking for something to happen.
“Girls get away with murder for real; they can cuss, argue at the teacher, skip and never get in trouble. They like to say it’s that time of the month to get out of PE. The only thing they get in trouble for is fighting. If a dude do anything like that they going home.”

Chris has high expectation for himself both academically and athletically. The fact that he wants to play college football drives his academics. He would love to have a 3.0 gpa by graduation, but understands that may be out of reach. Athletically, Chris wants to play for a Division I program and hopefully in the National Football League someday.

Aggregated Descriptive Analysis

The data collected from the interviews, perception scale and responses to the scenario are crucial to gaining a better understanding of how these African American males experience discipline practices in their high school. Participant responses that address the key issues in the research questions will be included in the analysis.

First Research Question: How do African American male high school students come to understand and define the discipline practices at their school?

Interviews

Three themes arose out of the interviews that focus on how these young men understand and define discipline practices in their school. First, there are perceived ambiguous and unambiguous infractions. Several of the participants felt that they were
unclear about certain infractions in regards to consequences. They would discover that peers of a different ethnicity or gender would receive less harsh consequences for the same infractions. They also discovered that the degree of punishment depended on which teacher or administrator dealt with the incident.

“I had witnessed it cause I was in the office and me and this girl got in trouble for the same thing and she got two days ISS and I got five days OSS” (Bert)

“It was one time I had got into a fight and got suspended for 10 days but I wasn’t sure why I got 10 days because it was a fight yesterday and those people got five days and both people threw a punch” (Dale)

The participants understood that there are also infractions that will earn a student a suspension no matter who they are. For the most part, these infractions are not subjective and the punishment is in accordance with the district’s code of conduct for students. Subjectivity can play a role when the punishment for an offense has a range. For example, the consequence for fighting could be five to ten days out of school. The amount of suspension days a student receives is at the discretion of the administrator. A white female may receive five days and a black male may receive ten.

Second, the use of scare tactics emerged as a theme. Participants disclosed that they feel teachers and administrators intimidate students with the threat of consequences. These scare tactics are in place to deter students from misbehaving and can be construed
as a positive or negative method of encouraging students to behave appropriately. Nevertheless, many of the participants believe these scare tactics are the principles guiding their school’s discipline policies.

“They want to scare you cause if you miss ten days that mean you going to fail they try to make kids not do it so kids won’t try to get suspended. They know people want to graduate” (Bert)

“Probably to scare kids, once you do it you probably not gone do it again, ten days is a long time you can’t really make that work up, ten days of straight zeros you basically failed the semester”(Sam)

The third theme was suspension resulting from infractions. The participants knew unequivocally what behaviors or offenses would earn them in-school suspension (ISS) or out-of-school suspension (OSS). For them, these behaviors are deemed unacceptable by their schools and swift and harsh consequences are the result. Consistent among all of the participants is the understanding that any form of physical aggression towards a peer or staff member will result in suspension.

“Skipping class is like three days OSS, fighting is probably ten days, destruction of school property is probably like ten days, I don’t know how they enforce it but if you misuse the computer is like five days”(Sam)
“If anybody bump on campus they gone get ten days, it don’t matter who started it
the only way you don’t get suspended is if you don’t fight back” (Chris)

“Fighting and smoking in school. Black kids get caught more smoking at school.
If they get caught with cigarettes they get suspended if they get caught with
cannabis the deputy search them down and they still get suspended”(Dale)

Scenario
The hypothetical behavioral scenario presented a situation to the readers in which
a male teacher disciplined two male students for engaging in a physical and verbal
altercation. One student was white and the other was African American and the manner
in which each student was treated is the focus of the scenario. The altercation occurred in
the classroom and after the teacher defused the situation the African American student
refused to stay after school and talk with the teacher. Due to his noncompliance, he was
referred to the assistant principal the next day and given in-school suspension. Although
both students used profanity and were physical with one another, only the African
American student received a discipline referral.

The five participants were asked which rules were broken by the characters in the
scenario based on the discipline policies in their schools. This question gave the
participants another opportunity to demonstrate their level of understanding of policies
and rules. Their response also revealed the inconsistencies which exist when in pertains
to disciplining students.

“Both of them were cussing each other, so they were both wrong. Then they was
pushing each other. So profanity and fighting are the two rules they broke.
(Chris)”

“You can’t use profanity in front of teachers, well some teachers cool and don’t
say nothing, but most of them will write you up. If you getting hands (physical) on
it depends on whether you stop when they tell you to or if someone have to break
you up.”(Bert)

“They were both cussing and fighting in the classroom and in front of the
teacher”(Ray)

“It really depends on who class you in or who the teacher is that hear you
cussing. Some of them will just get on to them and let it slide because they didn’t
fight. If they had one of my teachers they would have called the AP down to the
room quick-like.”(Dale)

The majority of respondents agreed that the inappropriate language and the physical
contact between the characters would have been rule violating behaviors.
Scale

Six of the fifteen items (1-4, 6 and 13) asked respondents about their overall understanding of discipline practices at their school. Item one asked students if they understood what behaviors result in a referral and 80% agreed. Item two asked if participants understood which behaviors resulted in a discipline referral and 40% agreed and 40% were not sure. There is a discrepancy between items one and two which basically asked the same question except item two asked about their understanding of discipline referrals.

Item three asked specifically if students knew the consequence for excessive tardies and 80% of the respondents agreed. Item four asked if they knew the consequence for gum chewing and 40% agreed and 40% were not sure. All of the respondents agreed with item six which asked if they knew the consequence for fighting. Item 13 asked respondents if they knew what behaviors resulted in out-of-school suspension and 100% of them agreed. Table 3 presents an item analysis detailing the percentage of the participants that agreed, disagreed, or were not sure about an item on the perception scale.
Table 3 – Frequency Results for Student Perceptions of Discipline Practices Survey

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Sample size (N) = 5
Freq = Frequency Count (number of participants responding to question)
Q = Question
Summary of Findings Related to the First Research Question

Based on the data collected from the interviews, scenario, and perception scale, it appears that the participants understand and define discipline practices based on their experiences. They know which behaviors result in more severe consequences, such as suspensions, and they understand that many consequences are not consistent among adults. From their perspectives, the consequence usually depends on which student is involved and which adult is involved more than the infraction itself. As a result, the inconsistencies in discipline practices encourage students to figure out what they can get away with and with who as opposed to teaching them appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.

Although the discipline tactics may scare students into behaving appropriately, they may or may not teach students the importance of exhibiting good behavior? Based on the responses from these participants it appears that the tactics merely taught them how to “play the game.” For these young men there my never be a true understanding of how to “play the game” because the rules always change.

Second Research Question: Do African American male high school students view the discipline policies at their school as fair and fairly administered to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status?
Interview

Four themes were generated from the interview data that are related to the second research question. The first theme deals with the equity of the administration of discipline from the participants’ perspectives.

“At my school, some points is fair and others I don’t think is fair. Like with the tardies I think its fair because I don’t have a lot of tardies I always get to class and I can’t remember the last time I skipped. What’s unfair is the unexcused absences; they don’t work with you or call you down to ask why are you being absent so much you get in trouble and I think they get a kick out of it. I think a referral put an extra dollar in their paycheck” (Dale)

“It’s pretty fair, they [students] shouldn’t do things to get into trouble, rules are made to be followed” (Sam)

“Mostly its fair but at my school they don’t take time to listen to the whole story and find out what happened they just….like when I got kicked out of class for laughing the teacher added more stuff like I was disrupting class I’m the class clown and whatever I do I get others to follow so in the office they read this and said the teacher wouldn’t lie. If the teacher said you did something they take they word and don’t ask other people in the class that didn’t get in trouble, they say they do but they never do” (Bert)
The second theme focuses on the inconsistencies that exist among teachers and administrators with regards to student behavior. The participants understand that certain behaviors are overlooked by some and not tolerated by others. The problem the participants encounter is trying to figure out which teacher will tolerate certain behaviors.

“Some teachers give you a warning and tell you calm down, some make it a big issue and some go off on you. Principals, some act different, some really concerned about what happened and some say you was talking alright you going home. One day, well some class we be walking talk around but still doing our work another class we stand up we get in trouble and we have to talk real quiet” (Bert)

“It was like that in the past, but when you get to high school teachers are pretty laid back, they don’t care as long as you do your work. I have heard students use profanity and some teachers write you a referral and others it really don’t matter.” (Sam)

“Some teachers, as long as you aint disrespectful and do your work, they don’t be riding you about stuff. They pretty cool as long as you aint cussing some body out. Then, it’s like some other teachers, if you breathe wrong they writing you up. You just gotta know who you dealing with.” (Chris)
The third theme focuses on being African American and dealing with school discipline practices. The participants had opposing views regarding this issue. Some felt that their ethnicity did not play a role in their discipline encounters, but others knew for sure it did.

“My P.E. coach wrote me up for skipping and he had wrote me a pass to help the custodian and I come back he wrote me up and a white boy came with me and he didn’t say nothing to him he went back in and lifted weights. He took the referral back because he knew he was wrong, but he aint say nothing to the other boy, he just questioned me” (Dale)

“Yeah like when I was in sixth grade this white boy thought I stole his pencil so he pushed me in the corner and tried to swing on me and missed and I hit him and he started bleeding he tried to hit me again so I had boomed him and so they suspended me for three days and they didn’t suspend him. I told them he pushed me and he didn’t get nothing” (Ray)

“I’m treated different, but in a good way because I play ball. I don’t get in a lot of trouble, but when I do the coach can talk to the teachers and most of the time my punishment aint that much. If I didn’t play ball or sat the bench nobody
probably wouldn’t care. Everybody know I’m tryin to go to school so they give me a break sometimes.”(Chris)

The fourth theme addressed the participants’ perspectives of the role gender plays in their disciplinary experiences. Three of the participants believe that being male influences how they are treated by teachers and administrators. Sam and Ray did not consider gender a factor in their disciplinary experiences.

“The APs were harder on the guys, the teachers let the girls get away with a little more say if a girl put they hands on you they don’t say nothing but if you put your hands on a girl…A female can straight go off in class yelling but if boys do it they figure we about to fight or something bout to go down so let’s get an AP down here pull you out of class and have all this stuff happen to you for no reason you could be joking but they don’t see that they don’t see the good that you be doing. I tried to break up a fight and I got in trouble and the kids fighting stood up for me and he [assistant principal] didn’t say sorry or nothing”(Dale)

“like if I’m in the hallway it seem like when I come down the hallway it can be several girls and me and they ask me if I have a pass like I suppose to be skipping….they probably say that since I’m a black male that out of class I must be up to something or getting into something” (Bert)
“It’s like teachers don’t expect females to be bad so they focus on the guys and when girls do sneaky stuff they always get away with it. They do worse stuff than us, especially talk loud and argue and stuff like that.”(Chris)

Scenario
The participants were asked two questions that would have them address issues of equity in regards to the scenario. The first question asked their thoughts as to why the teacher did not write Chris, a character in the scenario, up for his role in the altercation.

“Chris probably did not get written up because he was in the smart group. His teacher probably thought that a smart kid would try to start a fight with someone.”(Sam)

“He [Chris] didn’t get wrote up because he was white and the other kid was black. Just like the time when I got in trouble for hitting a white boy who pushed me first cause he thought I stole his pencil.”(Ray)

“I don’t know, if they were both cussing and pushing each other they both should have got written up. It was probably because the teacher was white too.”(Bert)

“Because one was black and the other was white. If a black dude and white dude about to bump everybody think the black person started it and that the white boy scared, but it ain’t always like that.”(Chris)
“Cause the teacher was white and he gone stick up for the white student, that’s just how some of them do.” (Dale)

The second question asked whether or not the black character had a right to be upset with the teacher since he was reprimanded and the other student was not.

“Richard was wrong to ignore the teacher, but they both cursed and pushed each other so they both should have got a referral. I would have been mad too!” (Bert)

“To tell you the truth, he shouldn’t be mad because he got off with a detention, at my school he would have been out for ten days.” (Dale)

“He shouldn’t have ran away, but he probably knew he was going to get in trouble and the smart kid wasn’t going to.” (Sam)

Perception Scale

Four items (5, 11, 12 and 14) inquired about participants’ perceptions of equity in the administration of consequences as it relates to gender and ethnicity. Item five stated that the principal or administrator treated all students the same when assigning consequences and 80% of the respondents disagreed. Item 11 asked students if teachers were consistent about sending students to the office and 60% of the respondents were not sure. Item 12 questioned whether or not students who misbehave are always sent to the office and 80% agreed that they are not. Based on these responses the participants perceive the discipline system at their schools as inequitable. It is important to note that
item 14 asked respondents if the principal was fair when dealing with students and 40% disagreed and 40% were not sure.

**Summary of Findings Related to the Second Research Question**

The second research question asked if the participants perceived discipline policies as being fairly administered regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomics. In general, the participants believe that the policies are fair but that there are areas of concern. They understood the need for discipline policies and at no point proposed that policies be abandoned by their schools. However, they did take issue with the inconsistent implementation of some discipline policies. For example, a participant expressed his frustration about some teachers allowing students to leave their seat without permission and others reprimanding students for the same action.

The participants had diverse views about the role their ethnicities played in their disciplinary experiences. The disparate treatment between European American and African American males was a common thread among the experiences of the participants. Surprisingly, there was one participant who felt the disparate treatment he received was beneficial. He believed being an African American “star” athlete often persuaded teachers and administrators to be more lenient when disciplining him. The differences in his experiences are probably a result of his athletic talents and what they mean to the football team and reputation of the school.
From the perspectives of the participants, gender also played a role in school discipline practices. The participants recognized a distinct difference between the sexes in regards to discipline. They believe that adults do not expect females to participate in many of the same rule-violating behaviors as males; therefore the tendency is to focus more on male students.

Third Research Question: How do African American male high school students experience the realities of discipline practices administered by teachers and administration?

Interviews

Two themes emerged which pertained to the third research question. These data were in response to specific questions about how participants had been disciplined and their perceptions of those experiences. The first theme centers on first-hand accounts of disciplinary experiences of the participants.

"On the bus the lady split us up called my friend four-eyes and told me to sit between two fat boys, it was already two people in the seat and she wanted me to sit between them and there was no room. I told her I wasn’t moving so when it was time to transfer she wouldn’t let me off the bus and she pushed me and tried to slang me in the seat so I did the same thing back" (Ray)
“One time I got kicked out of class for laughing with other students and got sent to the office and suspended for 3 days. I was in class it wasn’t my fault the girl was already in trouble and the principal was coming and I was laughing at the girl getting in trouble so when the principal came the teacher told all of us to go with him. He said he was going to send all of us home, it was about five of us” *(Bert)*

“When I was a freshman I got into it with this girl because she wanted to wear my [football] jersey on Friday. I said no and she kept saying she was going to slap me, and then she told the AP I was harassing her. I got called to student affairs and almost got suspended, but some of her friends told that I wasn’t harassing her. I almost got sent home for that.” *(Chris)*

The second theme to emerge from the data addresses the sometimes tumultuous relationships the participants have with female teachers. The participants were asked which teacher or administrator they associated being disciplined with in their minds. Three of them responded with the name of a female teacher. This could be a coincidence or evidence of a more deeply rooted issue; nevertheless this study will only focus on disciplinary interactions.
“Ms. Smith my Algebra 2 teacher. It seem like me and this other boy whatever we do we get in trouble about it and the rest of the class doing the same thing, she done tried to write me up about five times this year” (Bert)

“My homeroom teacher, we couldn’t too much talk in her class even though she said we could talk but it couldn’t be loud but when we whisper she complain so I said how we suppose to talk and she said don’t. I said I can’t have that so I talked to my friend in the next row over and she came to me first and I said Ms. Thomas why you didn’t say something to them and she said their not being loud”. Do you think it is because your deep voice carries? “I think she was singling me out, it shouldn’t matter if my voice deep or not if I’m talking to like where I like got to whisper and you still getting on me for being loud, come on” (Dale)

“My English teacher is Asian female, she is old and grumpy and she doesn’t like a lot of talking. Things happen in class like she doesn’t let you sleep she’ll call they name out. She yells at kids because she has a hard time with English but teaches English and they say stuff to her. Kids don’t have any respect and she’s not use to kids moving so slow. I’m in the honors class; I learn what I need to learn but she moves to slow for me” (Sam)
Scenario
The participants were asked two questions that deal with their realities regarding discipline practices in school. First, they were asked how they feel the teacher in this scenario should have handled the situation.

“If I was the teacher I would have met with the AP about the situation and then I would have had the AP meet with them. Whatever he would have decided to do would have been his choice. The teacher shouldn’t have just got one in trouble because they were both in the wrong.” (Chris)

“The teacher should have had them removed from class for being disruptive and let they AP handle the situation. Just because the white boy came back he was still cussing and pushing so they both should have got in trouble.” (Bert)

“To me, I would have just let it slide. They really didn’t fight so I wouldn’t have wrote them up.” (Ray)

Next, the participants were asked how they would have responded if they were the character (Richard) who did get in trouble. Hopefully, they would draw from their experiences and use those as a means to respond to this question.

“I would have been hot. I would have told my momma about it and let her handle it cause I would have just got into more trouble” (Dale)
“I don’t know. I would have been mad but it ain’t really nothing you can do cause they going to suspend who they want to anyway so what’s the point.” (Bert)

“I would be mad, but the next day I would have talked to the teacher and asked why I was the only one in trouble. Then I would have apologized for running away.” (Sam)

“I would have waited until the next day when I got called down to the AP and told him what happened and asked if we both should have got in trouble. If we were both doing the same thing then we should get the same punishment. Just because he didn’t run away, he was still cussing and about to fight.” (Chris)

Perception Scale

Items seven through ten and fifteen inquired about the reality of school discipline practices from the perspective of the respondents. For items seven and ten, a majority of the respondents agreed, disagreed or were not sure. Item seven asked if students have input in the type of consequence they receive and 80% of the respondents disagreed. Item ten asked if teachers have input as to what consequence a student receives and 60% agreed with this statement. There were no majority responses for the remaining items that corresponded with the third research question.
Summary of Findings Related to the Third Research Question

This question aims to understand school discipline practices from the perspective of five African American high school students. The participants discussed how they have come to understand their experiences as African American students. Each participant discussed specific incidents in which they felt they were punished unjustly. For example, a participant discussed the physical and verbal altercation he had with a bus driver. He felt justified in retaliating and as a result, he was suspended from school for five days.

Another commonality among their experiences involves relationships with female teachers. The participants were asked who they thought about when it came to being disciplined in school and three responded with the names of female teachers. The participants felt they were continuously singled out by these teachers and encounter many discipline problems in their classes. They attributed the negative experiences and unfulfilling relationships with these female teachers to being African American and male.

The participant responses to the scenarios focused on teachers being equitable when giving consequences to students. They believe that students should be disciplined, but the consequences should not be based on ethnicity or gender. They understand the necessity of rules and consequences but expressed frustration because they are held to a different standard. In addition to being held to a different standard, there are disparities in the standards based on which adult they come in contact with.
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| **RQ 1:** How do African American male high school students come to understand and define the discipline practices at their school? | **Ambiguity** – “It was one time I had got into a fight and got suspended for 10 days but I wasn’t sure why I got 10 days because it was a fight yesterday and those people got five days and both people threw a punch” (Dale)  
**Scare Tactics** – “They want to scare you cause if you miss ten days that mean you going to fail they try to make kids not do it so kids won’t try to get suspended. They know people want to graduate” (Bert)  
**Suspensions** – “Skipping class is like three days OSS, fighting is probably ten days, destruction of school property is probably like ten days, I don’t know how they enforce it but if you misuse the computer is like five days” (Sam) |
| **RQ 2:** How do African American male high school students view the discipline policies at their school as fair and fairly administered to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status? | **Equity of Administration** – “What’s unfair is the unexcused absences; they don’t work with you or call you down to ask why you are being absent so much you get in trouble and I think they get a kick out of it. I think a referral put an extra dollar in their paycheck” (Dale)  
**Inconsistencies** – “It was like that in the past, but when you get to high school teachers are pretty laid back, they don’t care as long as you do your work. I have heard students use profanity and some teachers write you a referral and others it really don’t matter.” (Sam)  
**Implications of Ethnicity** – “My P.E. coach wrote me up for skipping and he had wrote me a pass to help the custodian and I come back he wrote me up and a white boy came with me and he didn’t say nothing to him he went back in and lifted weights. He took the referral back because he knew he was wrong, but he ain’t say nothing to the other boy, he just questioned me” (Dale)  
**Implications of Gender** – “It’s like teachers don’t expect females to be bad so they focus on the guys and when girls do sneaky stuff they always get away with it. They do worse stuff than us, especially talk loud and argue and stuff like that.” (Chris) |
| **RQ 3:** How do African American male high school students experience the realities of discipline practices administered by teachers and administration? | **First-hand Experience** – “On the bus the lady split us up called my friend four-eyes and told me to sit between two fat boys, it was already two people in the seat and she wanted me to sit between them and there was no room. I told her I wasn’t moving so when it was time to transfer she wouldn’t let me off the bus and she pushed me and tried to slang me in the seat so I did the same thing back” (Ray)  
**Relationships with Female Adults** – “Ms. Smith my Algebra 2 teacher. It seems like me and this other boy whatever we do we get in trouble about it and the rest of the class doing the same thing. she done tried to write me up about five times this year” (Bert) |
Summary of Findings

This chapter utilized data collected through interviews, responses to a hypothetical scenario, and a perception scale to better understand how five African American males students perceive school disciplinary practices. They were offered the opportunity to discuss their experiences without fear of repercussion or consequence from anyone, especially a school official. The participants responded to questions and items that specifically addressed three areas. The first gauged how well they understood their school’s disciplinary system. The second addressed whether they viewed the discipline polices as fair and fairly administered to students regardless of race, gender or socioeconomics. The third examined their realities as they pertained to their individual experiences with school discipline practices.

The young men discussed issues of racism, sexism and other inequities as it pertains to how they are treated in school when confronted with disciplinary practices. Although the data gained from this study does not attempt to serve as the common experience for all African American male students, it does shed light on what many students who look like these participants may deal with on a daily basis. We understand that no two experiences are exactly the same, but the commonalities among the experiences of these young men should not be dismissed. Although they live different lives outside of school, in school many of them feel they are treated unfairly by the adults who have power over them.
The five participants in this study understand the discipline policies in their schools. This is not surprising, as most high school students probably understand the rules and policies established by their school or district to deal with discipline. For the participants in this study, their understanding is also a result of their disciplinary experiences. Each of them has been removed from the normal school setting because of a behavior infractions.

As we discussed discipline policies and procedures specific to their schools, it was evident that the participants knew what the consequences were for certain infractions based on established policies. The dilemma for them is that often consequences for similar infractions are not consistent among all students. More specifically, they believe their ethnicity and gender subjects them to harsher consequences. The participants also perceive some disciplinary fractions as ambiguous and infractions such as insubordination and class disruption can be subjective and vary according to the teacher.

On the whole, the participants perceive school discipline policies as fair and understand the importance of rules. Although they have had negative experiences with discipline practices, they do not advocate for the abolishment of discipline policies. What they are hoping for is the administration of discipline policies in a consistent manner. Some of the participants believe their masculinity was often the cause of mistreatment and that adults expected certain negative behaviors from them because they
are males. This is sort of the boys will be boys societal construct which is often used to explain or excuse the behavior of males.

The same can be said for the role ethnicity played in their disciplinary experiences. From their perspective, it seems there was always the notion of guilty until proven innocent. For most of the participants, first-hand experiences have proven to them that being African American results in disparate treatment with regards to school discipline. So, while the participants perceive the discipline polices at their schools as fair they do not perceive them to be fairly administered to all students regardless of their appearance.

Although there are some commonalities across the participants’ experiences, each have experienced the realities of discipline practices differently. Their realities are dictated by their actions, gender, ethnicity, school culture, teachers, and administrators. Together, these variables have resulted in negative disciplinary experiences. These experiences have been, at times, harsh and inequitable but have not minimized the importance of education for these young men. For these participants, their disciplinary experiences are part of their total life experiences and they take the positive with the negative in their attempt to use education to better their circumstances.
Chapter V
Discussion

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to examine a selected group of African American male students’ experiences and beliefs about disciplinary practices used in school. Equally important were the consideration of student attributions with respect to the intentions of discipline policies and the implications of student experiences and beliefs for the focus, rationale and administration of school-based discipline policies. This study provides a look into the discipline practices of three high schools from the perspective of those who experience it first-hand. The experiences of African American male students were sought because research suggests that this particular group receives harsher consequences for similar infractions than any other students.

This chapter will include four sections beginning with a summary of the findings based on the three research questions guiding the study. Second, the significance of the study will be discussed followed by the limitations of the study. Third, recommendations for future research will be discussed. Fourth, I will share personal reflections on my experiences conducting this study and my thoughts about the findings.

Summary of findings

This study was designed to give five African American males, who have experienced discipline practices, an opportunity to share their experiences. The data were
collected through interviews, responses from a scale and reactions to a hypothetical behavioral scenario. Analysis of the data reveals that these young men understand how their schools’ discipline system operates as well as some of the inequities that exist in these systems. It is important to note that these findings are based on the perspectives of the participants in this study. The major findings of this study are:

- The participants understand that there are objective disciplinary infractions which will result in a consequence and subjective infractions which may or may not result in a consequence.

- The participants believe that schools use scare tactics as a means to discourage them from behaving inappropriately by threatening failure through the use of out-of-school suspension.

- A lack of consistency in the administration of discipline contributes to the inequities that exist.

- Overall, the participants feel that the discipline policies in their schools are fair, but the manners in which certain policies are administered are unfair.

- The severity of discipline a student receives may be directly related to the adult a student encounters.

- Being an African American male plays a role in the type, severity and frequency of punishment.
Being a male plays a role in the type, severity and frequency of punishment.

The majority of disciplinary incidents the participants encountered occurred with female teachers.

The participants feel that teachers and administrators are not interested in hearing their side of the story.

Although they feel they are targeted and mistreated at times, the participants generally like school and understand the importance of education.

Educators may not understand that students understand more about their experiences, both positive and negative, than they realize.

Several of the findings are consistent with the literature on school discipline practices. For example, the participants believed that the disciplinary inequities which exist are a result of the inconsistent administration of discipline. Schwartz (2001) suggests that adults consider the reasons for their perceived misbehavior, especially when there are racial differences between the adult and student. Adults need to determine whether they are disciplining all students who violate a rule equally or if they have the tendency to single out certain groups of students. This may prove to be difficult because many believe that factors such as ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomics never play a role in their daily interactions with others.
The methods used by teachers and administrators to deter misbehavior were perceived as scare tactics by the participants. In addition to these tactics, the threat of failing or not graduating was always looming. An article on school discipline suggests that suspending and expelling students does not deter future misconduct (Bock et.al, 1998) so it seems unrealistic that the threat of suspension would fare any better, making these tactics an ineffective method for addressing misbehavior. For some students, the fear lies in having to attend school and be subjected to negative experiences so the opportunity to escape this situation is welcomed.

Based on the perceptions of the participants, their ethnicity and gender play a role in the type, severity, and frequency of the punishment they receive. Skiba (2000) found that males and blacks were over-represented on all school discipline measures and females and whites were under-represented on the same measures. Ruck and Wortley’s 2002 study, which examined student perceptions of differential treatment, revealed that ethnic minority students are more likely than white counterparts to perceive discrimination with respect to teacher treatment and suspension and that black students feel they are treated unfairly because of their race.

Lastly, but maybe most important, is the fact that the participants continue to believe that the discipline policies are fair in their schools. What they perceive as unfair is the manner in which certain policies are carried out. This may be a result of the cultural disconnect between the participants’ African American culture and the
mainstream culture of schools (Townsend, 2000). This cultural gap may continue to be a source of frustration and feeling of inequitable treatment for the participants until educators begin to understand their biases and make an honest effort to become more equitable in discipline practices.

**Significance**

This study gave five African American high school males who have experienced discipline practices the opportunity to share those experiences. There is a wealth of literature discussing school discipline policies and practices, but not from the perspective of students. The key to understanding the implications of these policies is embedded in the experiences of those directly affected by the policies. The experiences of these participants will be a positive contribution to existing literature on school discipline.

There is a body of research and literature that addresses the disproportionate discipline of African American males, but what is lacking is research that helps us understand the impact these practices have on students. Through this research, stakeholders are given an opportunity to understand how discipline policies and procedures affect African American males. The participants in this study believe that, because of their ethnicity and gender they are held to different standards. The experiences shared by these young men should compel school systems to consider the manner in which they treat African American students.
Limitations

The number of participants is the primary limitation in this case study. Although this study does not aim to generalize the experiences of the participants, the sample size can limit the amount of variability among the participants. The study seeks to utilize the experiences of the participants as a means of exploring how disparate discipline practices have affected them. Another potential limitation in this study is the use of self-report data. With this type of data the possibility exists that participants provided answers they perceived as acceptable to the person asking the questions. Onwuegbuzie (2003) refers to this as reactive arrangements. Lastly, the absence of observations in the school setting may limit this study but should not have impeded the participants’ ability to share their experiences.

Delimitations

The sample was limited to African American male high school students who participated in the leadership program at TBAH during the 2004-2005 school year. The site was chosen because they worked with African American males identified as “at-risk” for academic failure. The organization also partners with schools to assist students having disciplinary issues. Also, a relationship had been previously established with TBAH through Project LASER, which conducted an evaluation of their Youth Leadership Conference. The five participants attended three different high schools, thus the ability to generalize to all African American male high school students is limited.
The participants were restricted to African American males because school discipline research suggests that this sub-group is disciplined harsher than any other group in schools (Skiba, 2000).

**Implications for Future Research**

An exploratory study of this nature can guide researchers into areas in need of further investigation. Four recommendations are suggested as a result of this study. First, a follow up study should be conducted with the original participants. A significant amount of time has elapsed since the initial interviews were conducted. During this time the participants have gained more experiences and, perhaps, have had more insight into the discipline practices at their schools. They have also had time to reflect on the process of sharing their experiences and could possibly offer additional information about their experiences.

Second, similar studies should be conducted with high school age European and Latino males. The participants in this study indicated their ethnicity and gender were factors in their discipline experiences, and it would be interesting to know if their non-African American male counterparts shared this sentiment. It may also prove interesting to conduct research with African American female students and obtain their perspectives on how they are treated with regard to school discipline practices. All of these studies would contribute to our overall understanding of school discipline practices and the effects they have on students.
Third, a mixed method study may paint a better portrait of this phenomenon. The disproportionate discipline of African American males is an important enough problem that investigation on a larger scale is needed to understand and eventually eliminate this injustice. Last, notwithstanding the importance of student perspectives, it may be equally important to understand this problem from the perspectives of those administering the punishment. If we believe that African American males are being disciplined at disproportionate rates by adults, then the rationale and motivations behind these decisions need to be understood. We need to know if schools are intentionally singling out African American males. Having the perspectives of all stakeholders will be necessary if we are not only to understand this phenomenon, but also begin to effect change and increase the positive experiences of African American students who have been subjected to these practices.

Reflective Analysis

The purpose of this reflective analysis is to allow readers to gain a better understanding of how my experiences led me to conduct a study of this nature. Even more important is for readers to understand how my experiences and the need to understand more about these five young men led me to this methodology. I began this study with the understanding that I would not achieve objectivity nor would I be able to set my biases aside. As an African American male, student, and educator it would be impossible for me check those experiences at the door and conduct a study of this nature.
Who I am is the reason why I chose to research disparate discipline practices among African American males.

My educational experiences as an African American student were very different from the experiences of the participants in this study. I attended schools which were predominantly upper middle-class and white, especially my elementary school. From kindergarten through sixth grade, I was the only African American student in my class and never had a teacher who looked like me. Excluding my five brothers and sisters, I only recall three other African American students attending the school during those seven years. So needless to say I stuck out, but never had a problem with fitting in. I had great teachers and have fond memories of all of them. This is not to say that I did not have disagreements with teachers, but they never resulted in me being referred to the administrator’s office. I misbehaved sometimes, but I cannot recall those behaviors being attributed to me being an African American male. I am not naïve enough to think that at some point my teachers never discussed my ethnicity in relation to my behavior and/or academic ability. What is important is that I do not remember them treating me any different than the other students and maybe that is because they knew my parents would not have tolerated that type of behavior from them.

My junior high school demographics were very different from elementary. The breakdown was approximately 70% white, 25% African American, and 5% Latino. The school was also more diverse in regards to socioeconomic status with students who lived
in public housing and those whose parents were millionaires. Even so, we shared a common bond because we were all dealing with teenage issues and puberty. I recall many of my African American friends, who never had much contact with whites, becoming best of friends with many of my white friends.

In high school I began to notice a difference with some of my white friends and the way they treated me. Some of these people had known me their entire lives, but all of a sudden my ethnicity and socioeconomic status was an issue. The cliques began to form and I had to make decision about where I wanted to be. This did not bother me because I had many friends of various ethnic backgrounds and I chose to continue those relationships. I did not notice a difference with my teachers. I was well known by the time I reached high school because I had five siblings who attended the same school. Most of my teachers were very fond of me because I was an honor student, a varsity athlete and never had disciplinary problems.

I often wonder how different my experiences would have been if I had been perceived as a “troublemaker.” I recall a fight on the day of a football game between two wealthy white males in the cafeteria. They were both in school the following Monday and the only punishment I remember is that the football player was not allowed to play that night. That was not a real consequence because he was third or fourth string and rarely played in our games. I want to believe that if I were a participant in the fight that I would have been “slapped on the wrist” but I do not. As popular and studious as I was, I
am sure the moment I would have committed an infraction there would have been an immediate and harsh consequence.

There was a dean at my high school who had several encounters with my parents about my two older brothers. They were star football players, which at my school meant they were above the law. This was true for anyone who excelled on the football field and did not have much to do with ethnicity. I recall an incident in which my brother was supposedly involved during his senior year and the dean was threatening to suspend him from school. In the end, my brother was absolved of any wrongdoing and graduated with his class. The dean was the only administrator I did not have a good relationship with. He never spoke to me in halls, office or anywhere else. I do remember him always asking me if I was “staying out of trouble.” His question was not out of general concern and had an element of sarcasm. There was no logical reason to continually ask a student with an unblemished discipline record if they were having discipline problems. I honestly believe he hoped that I would commit an infraction so he would have the chance to discipline me. Fortunately, I never gave him that opportunity.

My experience as a teacher really opened my eyes to the inequities that exist in many of our schools, especially with regards to discipline. By having aspirations to be a school administrator, I was given the opportunity to spend a great deal of time working in the administrative offices at various schools and seeing first hand the disparate practices that occur in the area of discipline. What was discouraging is this issue seemed to be
common practice, and no one thought that something was wrong with the way African American students were being treated. For example, there was a style of dress in which African American males would roll one of their pants legs up to their knees. This style was generated out of the Hip-Hop culture and could be seen on music videos. Somehow this style became linked to gang activity and was immediately banned on campus. African American males were being disciplined constantly for participating in this fad. No one took the time to understand this new style or explain why it may have been inappropriate because African American students were participating in it.

While working as a graduate student, I spent time at a school in which the suspension rates of African American students was double that of their enrollment in the school and triple that of their enrollment in honors classes. On a weekly basis, I spoke with African American males who had been identified as “at-risk” for academic failure. We discussed their educational experiences in general and it was then I learned that these young men were aware of the unfair treatment they receive. The harsh reality for these students is they are part of a system designed to silence them and give them very little power. For example, several of the students expressed that when they received a discipline referral they never had a chance to tell their side of the story. As a result, they believed teachers could falsely accuse them of anything and they would be punished. This is not to say that some behaviors were not inappropriate, but schools should want to understand the cause of certain behaviors as opposed to only disciplining students.
The more time I spent talking with these young men, reading about disproportionate discipline practices, reviewing school discipline data, and reflecting on my own school experiences, the more interested I became in this issue. Undoubtedly, the most useful information I received came from the stories of the young men I talked to. There was one student who had been suspended from school at least once a year since he was in third grade. At the time I met with him he was in the seventh grade and had been suspended several times since he entered middle school. He spoke about teachers who told him at the beginning of the school year that he would not have a positive year. He knew that teachers thought the worst of him and that his reputation as a thug preceded him. He was not a thug or hoodlum, but saw himself as these things because those expectations were placed on him. I wonder if his experiences would have been different if each year the expectation was that he was going to be an honor roll student.

I knew that the key to understanding disproportionate discipline and its effects was to understand it from the perspective of the students. Who better to tell me how it feels to be unfairly targeted or held to a different standard than those individuals who were experiencing it first-hand. Although we shared many things in common such as our ethnicity, gender, taste in music and fashion, family structure, etc.; the one distinct difference was our experiences in school.

I was in a position to give a few young men an opportunity to tell their stories for the first time. Telling their stories has been difficult because it is not easy to capture
some of their emotions with words. The look in their eyes as they shared some of the painful experiences is difficult to put into words. My biggest fear is that the emotions will be lost in translation and readers will not experience the feelings or gain the understanding I did. The strongest emotion I experienced was pride, not for me, but for the five young men in this study. Their education continued to be a priority even after some of the experiences they have faced. Racism, sexism, and negative stereotypes have been barriers for these young men, but they have been resilient in their efforts to earn diplomas and go to college. Their stories may encourage others to share their experiences and continue to expose the inequities that continue decades after Brown vs. Board of Education sparked the integration of schools and the Civil Rights movement.

It was difficult for me to write about their family situations for fear of readers assuming that a lack of a traditional family structure may play a role in the troubles these young men have faced. Two of the participants lived in households with fathers who were active in their life, which was great, but it did not mean they received more or less support than the others. It was equally difficult for me to provide physical descriptions of the participants because I did not want a reader to justify a female teacher being intimidated by these African American young men. At a certain level I felt I would be feeding into the negative stereotypes that already exist about African American males. I realized I could not control what readers took from this study, how they perceived these
participants, or how they perceived me. My obligation was to tell the truth and allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

I can only hope that this study and the participants’ experiences that have been shared will impact educational research as much as they have impacted me personally. Before conducting this study I took my educational experiences for granted. I did not realize how those early experiences helped me set and attain goals. My realities and experiences were very different from the young men in this study. I do not believe that my awareness of racism was muted because my parents made me aware of bigotry and I experienced it. I believe I was able to be successful in school despite racism because I did not fit many of the stereotypes placed on African American males. As a result, my teachers challenged me just as hard as high-achieving white students and expected me to achieve.

As an African American man, educator, and administrator I understand the importance of expectations and the effect they can have on young people. The negative perceptions and low expectations often placed on children of color are detrimental to their development. When our expectations are low and students meet them we have a tendency to blame the student or their parents. Until educators begin to expect the most from every student, issues such as inequitable discipline practices will continue.

The participants in this study have had a profound affect on me personally and professionally. There have been many instances in which I wished my educational
experiences had been different, particularly the K-12 years. I lived in two very
disconnected worlds, but somehow learned early on how to navigate between the two.
Having reflected on those experiences heavily over the past year, I realize that my ability
to adapt in different social settings is a direct result of my experiences as a youth.

Professionally, this study has reinforced my commitment to being an educator and
advocate for children. Ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status should not serve as
barriers to success for any student. I was fortunate to have very positive school
experiences which are directly related to the success I have experienced in this
profession. As an educator, I am obligated to ensure that all students have positive
school experiences, especially those who historically have not.

I realize these five stories do not represent the school experiences of all African
American male students. The research on school discipline suggests that there are many
other young men who have similar stories that have gone unheard. It is hoped that this
study will encourage other researchers to share the experiences of other students.
References


McMasters, C. (2002). Student and teacher perceptions of discipline at the middle school level. (Thesis paper)


Appendix A: Student Perceptions of Discipline Practices

Please circle one answer for each of the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number of times you have been suspended (ISS or OSS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) 9th</td>
<td>a) Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) 10th</td>
<td>b) 1-2 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) 11th</td>
<td>c) 3-5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) 12th</td>
<td>d) 6-10 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) More than 10 times</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please answer the following questions, using the scale below, with the answer that best identifies how strongly you agree or disagree with the statement.

Totally disagree= 1 Somewhat disagree= 2 Not sure=3 Somewhat agree=4 Totally agree=5

1. I understand what behaviors result in a referral. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I understand what behaviors result in a discipline referral. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I know what the consequence is for excessive tardies. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I know what the consequence is for excessive gum chewing. 1 2 3 4 5
5. The principal treats all students the same when assigning consequences. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I know what the consequence is for fighting. 1 2 3 4 5
7. Students have input about what consequence they might receive for breaking school rules. 1 2 3 4 5
8. The principal listens to the student when discussing discipline referrals. 1 2 3 4 5
9. The principal is available to see students when there is a problem. 1 2 3 4 5

10. Teachers have input about what consequences students receive for breaking school rules. 1 2 3 4 5

11. Teachers are consistent about sending students to the office 1 2 3 4 5

12. Students who misbehave are not always sent to the office 1 2 3 4 5

13. I know what step results in out of school suspension. 1 2 3 4 5

14. The principal is fair when dealing with students. 1 2 3 4 5

15. Teachers send students to only when necessary. 1 2 3 4 5
Appendix B: Hypothetical Behavioral Scenario

One afternoon, John planned to conduct a test review in the form of a quiz-show game. On this particular day, his clinical instructor was absent and a substitute teacher was in his place. The clinical instructor seldom if ever attended class, so this day was much like any other for John. He was accustomed to having complete freedom to plan for and instruct this class as he deemed best. Because he was given this autonomy, he chose to take a different approach with the class than that of the clinical instructor. The clinical instructor had usually given the students individual written assignments to complete and he used very little direct instruction or group work approaches with them. John felt that it was important to use a variety of instructional techniques for these students.

After directing the students to form groups of their choice, he began the game with the expectation that although the class would be “rowdy,” the game would prove to be an enjoyable and effective review technique. Very little time had elapsed before John realized that the students had selected themselves into groups along racial and academic achievement lines. Six high-achieving white students formed two groups of three each. Only one black female was high achieving. Of the low-achieving students, seven were black and one was a white male. These remaining nine students formed three groups of three each. John knew that the white students also came from upper-middle-class neighborhoods, whereas the other students came from relatively poor homes. Although
he was aware of these factors, he was yet to appreciate the potential volatility of the situation.

When an argument erupted between one of the students from a high-achieving group (Chris) and one of the low-achieving students (Richard), he immediately rose and stepped between them. Ignoring the obscenities being exchanged, John moved quickly to separate them because they had already begun pushing a shoving each other. After separating the students, he was able to recommence the game, which continued more or less successfully until the end of the class period. As the class was dismissed, however, the two students resumed their hostile exchange at the door.

Again, John moved to intervene, calling both students back to the classroom. Only Chris complied. Richard ran down the corridor and turned the corner. Because Chris did not start the argument, and because John thought that it would have been fruitless to discuss the issue with only one of the students involved, he released Chris to go home.

In the empty classroom, John reflected on the incident. Despite Richard’s academic difficulties, he had not been, up to this point, a behavioral problem in class. In fact, John knew very little about him beyond the fact that he was an academically weak student and had been retained several times. Consequently, Richard was much older and larger than his classmates. John felt that he should not allow Richard’s flagrant
disobedience to go unaddressed. He decided to go look for Richard. Finding Richard at
the bike rack just outside the building, he approached him and said that he wanted to talk.
Richard responded by jumping on his bike and stating, “I don’t got time for this,” as he
rode away. John, stinging with indignation, immediately went to the office and submitted
a disciplinary referral.

Upon Richard’s arrival at school the following morning, John presented him with
the referral notice and walked with him to the office for a conference with the vice
principal. As he went about his chore, Richard began to make comments in a somewhat
staged whisper to the student next to him. These comments amounted to threats directed
toward John, such as, “I’m going to break his jaw.” At this point, John decided to ignore
the remarks.

As he was leaving, he once again encountered Richard, who had gone to the
hallway water fountain. John glanced at him as he walked by, and Richard retorted
sharply, “Don’t be looking at me, boy.” John was becoming increasingly angered by
Richard’s exhibition in front of another student. Although he thought it best to ignore the
remarks, he wheeled around and faced Richard. Taking a deep breath to catch himself,
he slowly hissed through clenched teeth, “Go in, sit down, and don’t make anything
worse on yourself.” Just sit down and shut up and wait for Mr. Roberts to see you.”
After mumbling a few unintelligible remarks, Richard complied.
Appendix B: (Continued)

Although Mr. Roberts had agreed to keep Richard in the in-school suspension (ISS) rather than sending him to John’s class that afternoon, Richard showed up in class. Obviously, Mr. Roberts had bungled the ISS schedule somehow, and now John had to deal with Richard in spite of the tensions created by the situation. Fortunately, Richard remained quiet and low-key throughout class.

When John reminded him of the detention that afternoon, Richard declared that he had to catch his bus or he would have no way home. Doubting that this was the case, John told Richard that he could go home as long as he made arrangements to stay the following day. He also warned him that failure to do so would result in a re-referral and possible suspension.

John’s difficulty with Richard escalated the next day during the suspension period. Ironically, John had not seen Richard in class because he had been kept in ISS. He couldn’t help feeling a little resentful that Mr. Roberts had failed to keep Richard the day before and then kept him when it no longer mattered. At least, he thought, they could give me a little support downstairs. How hard could it be, after all, to keep a simple ISS schedule straight?

Upon arrival for his afternoon detention, Richard announced, “The only reason I’m staying this detention is because Mr. Roberts said I had to.” When John attempted to explain to him exactly why he was given detention, Richard’s behavior became erratic.
A sickening knot formed in John’s stomach as he realized that he was losing control of the situation.

Because Richard refused to be seated, and walked around the room striking the computer, walls, desks and other objects with a yardstick, John was forced to ask students who had remained after school to complete a project to go to the library. John told him several times to be seated and tried to explain to him why he had gotten the referral. Each time, Richard retorted, “How come Chris didn’t get a referral?” John attempted to explain several more times that the referral was not given for fighting, but for running away and refusing to return. Several times during John’s explanations, Richard covered his ears and began singing a rap tune. With each explanation, he repeated the same refrain, “How come Chris didn’t get a referral?”

Soon, Richard began performing a rap song with graphic lyrics that detailed his plan to beat up Chris. Several times he told John that he was going downstairs to tell the vice principal that, “You were trying to beat me up, that you were trying to hit me with the yardstick, and that you were trying to slit my throat.” He called John “stupid” and peanut-head,” declared that he hated him, and asked him why he didn’t go back to the university. John began to sense that the differences in race and backgrounds had something to do with the animosity he was receiving from Richard.
At intervals, Richard pulled a small bottle from his jacket pocket and drank from it. The contents looked like water, but he called it his “beer” and “wine.” Twice during this period, Richard wandered outside of the classroom. Both times, John followed him, reminding him that during detention he must stay in the room. When Richard decided to return to the classroom, he preceded John inside, pulled the door closed, and held it so that he could not get in.

Once inside the classroom, John attempted to get some work done, but Richard’s singing was too loud for him to concentrate. When John delivered a stern look in his direction, Richard leaped from his chair and confronted him. “You staring at me. Don’t be looking at me. Have you got a problem? Implicit in this confrontation was a physical threat. John sensed that Richard was soliciting a fight. His pulse quickened and, much to his chagrin, John found himself sizing up Richard’s physical bearing, comparing it to his own, inch by inch, pound by pound.

At that moment, John saw a student walking down the hall. Slipping out of the room, he asked the student to get the teacher next door. The teacher, who happened to be Richard’s English teacher, was quick to grasp the situation. Stepping inside the classroom, she ordered him in a stern voice to sit down. Richard retaliated with several sharp remarks. It was clear that he was ready to take her on as well. Realizing this, she went downstairs to the vice principal, who told her to release Richard from detention.
Appendix B: (Continued)

Before he released Richard, John told him that he intended to report his behavior and to refer him. Initially, Richard refused to leave until he had completed his detention because he thought that John would not be able to refer him if he stayed for the duration of the period. Finally, John told him that he could stay if he wanted, but he would still get referred. Richard insisted upon remaining for the entire period.
Appendix C: Letter of Support

Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, Inc.
1702 N. Nebraska Avenue
Tampa, FL 33602-2512

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is being written in support of Mr. Simon Earle and his effort to conduct research related to African American males and school disciplinary practices. The Tampa Bay Academy of Hope is a community based organization that teaches young people the skills to overcome the effects of poverty, violence, and negative influences in their lives, as well as, how to tap into their inner strength to achieve personal greatness.

The mission of the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope is to reverse the cycle of poverty, crime and educational underachievement in economically depressed areas by instilling leadership, responsibility, and self-esteem in youth that will transition them from lives of hopelessness, poverty and dependency to self-sufficiency. Since incorporation as a non-profit [501(C)(3)] agency in July 1996, the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, Inc. (TBAH) has assisted more than 850 youth with leadership training, counseling, referrals, mentoring, job placement and scholarship needs. TBAH is giving Simon Earle permission to use our site as a resource to assist him in collecting the data necessary to move forward with his project.

Tonya Donaldson, Director
About the Author

Simon Y. Earle received his bachelors and masters degrees from the University of South Florida. He is currently an assistant principal at a middle school in North Carolina. Simon taught children with Emotional Handicaps and Severe Emotional Disturbances at the middle school level. He has also worked with Hillsborough County School’s district office in the Department of Assessment and Accountability and School Choice Programs. Simon began the doctoral program in the fall of 2001 and was a recipient of the Linking Academic Scholars to Academic Resources (LASER) Doctoral Fellowship and the Cathy Lynn Richardson Endowed Doctoral Scholarship. His research interests are disproportionate representation of African Americans in Special Education and the disproportionate discipline of African American male students.