FOSTERING EQUITABLE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION BY REDUCING THEIR DISCIPLINE
DISPROPORTIONALITY RATES

BY
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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities enrolled in public schools continue to struggle to gain equitable access to learning opportunities, despite federal protections. Because of the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, researchers have indicated that students in special education are disciplined at rates 2 to 3 times that of their nondisabled counterparts. The purpose of this study was to determine whether a reduction in discipline disproportionality rates of students in special education was observable within the first 2 years of an intentional discipline reform strategy due to the implementation of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports. The research questions for this study include: RQ1: Does implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, increase or decrease discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?; and RQ2: Will implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, result in a meaningful change in discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation? The setting of this study was a public middle school located in southwest Washington and included a census of sixth-to eighth-grade students who had experienced school discipline. This research was designed to provide data on one school’s intentional intervention and should be pertinent
to school leaders, students in special education, and their families. The data analysis procedure of the study included computing descriptive statistics for central tendency and an effect size measurement to determine meaningful significance. The findings of this study include a 67.5% reduction of incidents resulting in students with disabilities being suspended or expelled between the first pre- and last post-intervention data and a medium to large effect size change between all years examined. School leaders could apply similar strategies to identify and reduce discipline disproportionality rates in a school of similar demographics. One future research suggestion includes examining the success of a similar intervention if not all of the included components are implemented.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Despite the rulings of Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) that guaranteed equitable learning opportunities for all students within the public educational system, there is an abundance of new research, such as Burke and Nishioka’s (2014) study on suspension and expulsion patterns in Oregon school districts, that has documented that issues of inequity are still a concern across the nation. Whitford, Katsiyannis, and Counts (2016) suggested, in their research on discriminatory discipline trends, that students with disabilities were at greater risk of being treated unfairly compared with those without disabilities. Additionally, in a study about the need to revise federal policies for students with disabilities, Lusk (2015) voiced that public schools were still denying the right to learn to students enrolled in special education. While some areas of public education have been overhauled in an attempt to provide equitable learning to underserved students, Rumberg and Losen (2017) stated, in their research on the costs of harsh school discipline, that further attention is needed in the way school leadership manages student discipline.

For decades, schools have relied primarily on punitive disciplinary practices to modify student behaviors. Gershoff (2017) articulated, in a study on school punishment with a global perspective, that one of the earliest forms of managing student behavior in the United States was through the use of corporal punishment. Downs (2015) mentioned, in research on alternatives to punitive discipline, that corporal punishment had been used in the United States since the 1700s, based upon religious practices at the time.

While the use of corporal punishment has been somewhat controversial, the U.S. Supreme Court decided it was an acceptable method for schools to use. Despite the
Ingraham vs. Wright (1977) decision that supported the use of corporal punishment by school leaders, Gershoff and Font (2016) indicated, in a study about the punishment styles used in U.S. public schools, that the negative attention given to corporal punishment has resulted in a decline in its use since 1977. However, Gershoff and Font also claimed that corporal punishment was still in use in 19 states, which have reported over 160,000 incidents of use in schools annually. The states currently practicing corporal punishment in schools include Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming (Gershoff & Font, 2016). While these 19 states support the use of corporal punishments in schools, Downs (2015) stated, in his research about alternative strategies to corporal punishment, that not all school districts within these states permit its use.

Since many states and school districts have agreed that corporal punishment no longer fits the values of modern society, school leaders have searched for other strategies to manage student behavior. As a result, school administrators began to rely on the use of suspensions and expulsions as their primary strategy to manage students’ behaviors (Downs, 2015). Unfortunately, due to school leaders’ overreliance on exclusionary discipline, disproportionality in discipline between student groups has been created, as articulated by Rocque and Snellings (2017) in their research on factors contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Despite federal protections, like the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, which were created to prevent issues of inequity from happening, students receiving special education services are experiencing the largest rates of
discipline disproportionality compared to other student groups. Losen, Hodson, Ee, and Martinez (2015) stated, in research on closing the school discipline gap, that students receiving secondary school special education are being suspended at the highest rates, which are 2 to 3 times that of their nondisabled peers. These practices raise concerns on whether these students are receiving equitable opportunities to learn.

When it comes to making a change, school leaders have a pivotal role in providing equitable learning opportunities for all of their students. Datnow, Greene, and Gannon-Slater (2017) expressed, in their study on the importance of using data-driven decision making to ensure equity, that school leaders should regularly monitor data to identify areas of inequity and then locate research-based interventions they can implement to help reduce the deficits.

In April of 2016, the Evergreen Public School’s Board of Directors, which is the school district that this study’s data were collected from, changed their discipline policy to state that school leaders “shall” use alternatives to suspensions and save excluding students from school for the most egregious of incidents. The school board also asked that all alternatives to suspension be rooted in positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) and the restorative practices philosophy (ESD #114, 2016). Positive behavior interventions and supports and the restorative practices philosophy are newer behavioral interventions aimed at teaching students a set of core values and how to build empathy for others. This study was designed to provide school leaders with data on one middle school’s intentional efforts to use an alternative method of student management to reduce discipline disproportionality and to provide statistics on the amount of change observed within the first few years of implementation.
In lieu of suspensions, and to be used as the school’s Tier 3 PBIS strategy, the middle school that was the focus of this study created what it refers to as the Student Success Academy. The Student Success Academy has taken the idea of in-school suspension and added an enhanced educational value to it. In a study about predictors and academic outcomes associated with in-school suspensions, Cholewa, Hull, Babcock, and Smith (2017) stated that in-school suspensions have traditionally been held in a room where students report for several periods to several days, and often the only expectation is that they sit quietly for the entire duration while keeping themselves occupied. The Student Success Academy, on the other hand, was intentionally created to facilitate social-emotional learning to teach students skills they may be lacking to help them avoid a similar situation in the future. A special education teacher and a staff assistant are assigned to the Student Success Academy and deliver social-emotional learning through the WhyTry curriculum and the incorporation of the restorative practices philosophy, which are explained further in Chapter 2. In addition to receiving social-emotional learning, students get to participate in community service that gives back to the school, and they are provided with the classwork they would have done in class that day. Finally, as part of the exit procedure, the student meets with their teachers, counselor, and administration to reflect on what they did to end up in the Student Success Academy, whom their actions have affected, what they have learned, and what support they need from the school to help them succeed.

**Study Background and Foundation**

Even with the laws that have been passed to provide students with equitable access to learning, many students continue to face barriers to a successful education due
to the way school administrators manage student discipline, as observed by Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz (2016) in studies on using restorative practices to achieve equity in school discipline. Rocque and Snellings (2017) mentioned, in research on the factors that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, that the overuse of punitive disciplinary practices by school leaders, specifically suspensions and expulsions, have created disproportionality in discipline between student groups across the nation. In a study about eliminating disparities in school discipline, Gregory, Skiba, and Mediratta (2017) stated that nationwide data have revealed that African American and Hispanic students are suspended at a rate twice that of their White peers. However, students who qualified for special education services tend to receive the highest rates of disproportionality.

With overwhelming data on disparities in school discipline, federal policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) are being created to help alleviate these inequities. In research conducted on incorporating social and emotional learning and equity in school discipline, Gregory and Fergus (2017) stated that educational leaders are now being held accountable for their discretion when it comes to the use of exclusionary discipline.

**Current State of the Field in Which the Problem Exists**

For the first time in history, the United States has passed legislation that specifically addresses concerns over the use of exclusionary discipline practices in publicly funded schools. The ESSA (2015) has mandated that schools take a closer look at their discipline practices. Gregory and Fergus (2017) detailed that, as part of the ESSA, schools are to limit the use of discipline that removes students from their learning
environment. More specifically, the ESSA requires states to collect discipline data from schools and for the school districts to develop plans to reduce exclusionary discipline (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Because of these new requirements, schools are trying to develop solutions to make sure they comply with federal regulations. In research on eliminating disparities in school discipline, Gregory et al. (2017) emphasized that, as a result of the ESSA, schools are trying to implement strategies to reduce their use of exclusionary discipline, without researching if the strategies have proven to be successful. The primary concern with this practice is that when school leadership fails to use data-driven decision making, they are engaging in what Gregory et al. (2017) referred to as an “implement and hope philosophy” (p. 258). Not only does this practice leave the effectiveness of school policies and practice in question, but also it may violate provisions of the IDEA, which explicitly requires that schools use research-based interventions when working with groups that may include students in special education (IDEA, 2004).

**Historical Background**

Concerns about disproportionate discipline rates among student groups, including those receiving special education services, have existed for decades. However, in the early 1990s, as a result of the adoption of zero-tolerance policies that mandated punitive consequences for discipline, concerns about school leaders’ use of punitive discipline skyrocketed, according to Wilson’s (2014) findings in a study about eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline. Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton (2016) claimed the number of students suspended from school in the United States had tripled from 1.7 million in 1974 to over 5 million in 2011, as voiced in their study about using empathetic discipline.
Furthermore, Sullivan, Van Norman, and Klingbiel (2014) stated, in research examining student characteristics that predict the likelihood of suspension, that the number of students in special education receiving suspensions had increased by 50% since the 1980s. Burke and Nishioka (2014) conducted research examining the suspension and expulsion patterns among one school district in Oregon in which students in special education were being suspended at 4 times that of their nondisabled peers.

When analyzing students in special education by disability type, the discipline rates for certain disabilities are even more disproportionate. McElderry and Cheng (2014) conducted research where discipline data were filtered based on the type of learning disabilities with which students had been diagnosed. They found students diagnosed with emotional behavior disorders were 11 times more likely than their general education classmates to be suspended and 9 times more likely to be suspended than students with other disabilities (McElderry & Cheng, 2014). Whitford et al. (2016) stated, in their research on discriminatory discipline trends, that students diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder had a higher rate of being suspended than students with other disabilities. Furthermore, Sullivan et al. (2014) conducted research similar to McElderry and Cheng and observed similar results in disparities by disability type. However, Sullivan et al. questioned if the school administration’s overreliance on exclusionary discipline was a better predictor of suspension than any category of disability.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

While there have been numerous studies on the effectiveness of behavioral reform strategies in the United States, most of these studies focus on racial disparities and omit
data specific to students in special education. For example, there have been several recent studies conducted within the Denver Public Schools that have focused on discipline disparities and providing students with equitable learning opportunities. In a case study conducted in the Denver Public Schools dealing with the relationship between a student’s race and likelihood of being referred for discipline, Anyon et al. (2014) investigated the effects of a discipline reform strategy designed to keep students in class while using the restorative practices philosophy to teach students the skills they need to navigate difficult situations. Anyon et al. chose to focus on racial disparities, claiming that students in special education are a variable that has not consistently been associated with school discipline concerns in other studies. However, Anyon et al. only cited one study as the basis for their rationale.

In similar research examining the use of restorative practices to address racial disparities within Denver Public Schools, González (2015) conducted further research on this topic, which included an additional 3 years of data compared to Anyon et al.’s (2014) research. Parallel to the research Anyon et al. conducted, González did not refer to the special education population whatsoever. Furthermore, data collection and analysis was limited to post-reform data and include no comparison to pre-reform statistics.

Because students in special education have federal protections in place to protect them from overexposure to punitive discipline, researchers tend to exclude them from studies on this issue (Anyon et al., 2014). Typically referenced in these studies are the protections provided under IDEA—more specifically, Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the manifestation determination review. However, there are researchers who are dedicated to analyzing IDEA’s manifest determination review procedure and
questioning its effectiveness at keeping students in special education in school, as Lewis (2017) stated in a study on the need for policy change and guidance on IDEA. A deeper examination of the history, current state, and deficiencies of evidence related to this issue are explored in Chapter 2.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that in the field of public education, the overuse of exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as suspensions and expulsion, has created disproportionality in discipline rates, especially among students in special education. This disparity raises the question of whether students in special education are receiving the free and appropriate public education that the law guarantees. Researchers from across the nation have indicated that this may not be the case, as students in special education are being suspended at the rate of 2 to 3 times that of students in general education (Whitford et al., 2016).

When students are removed from their classrooms, they are deprived of their opportunity to learn. In many cases, these students miss out on crucial skills that will be needed for future lessons. As a result, when a student faces tasks that they have not learned how to navigate, they may display undesirable behaviors out of frustration. This can then result in a cycle of discipline and the student falling further behind their peers (Okonofua et al., 2016).

**Audience**

This study was designed to provide data on an intentional middle school alternative-to-discipline reform strategy. The goal of this study was to determine what degree of change, if any, is observed in the discipline rates of students receiving special
education services. The intent of this research is to provide school leaders with statistics on what results they might expect to see within the first 2 years of a comparable discipline reform strategy in a school with similar demographics. Additionally, the findings of this research may be relevant to the parents and family members of students with disabilities, both general and special education staff, school district leaders, local policymakers, and organizations that monitor equity and civil rights.

**Specific Leadership Problem**

One of the many responsibilities that school leaders have is to ensure that all students receive an equitable opportunity to learn. In research examining school leaders’ roles in equity, Ward et al. (2015) stated that providing equity within the public school setting has been a daunting challenge for school leaders across the globe. Providing equitable opportunities is even more challenging when it comes to identifying and addressing learning opportunities for protected groups, like students in special education services (González, 2015). Effective school leaders should actively seek out issues of inequality by reviewing school data, and then research data-driven interventions to help create equitable opportunities for those identified students (Ward et al., 2015).

However, as Hernandez-Melis, Fenning, and Lawrence (2016) found in their study, there is limited research on data-based interventions aimed at reducing the disproportionality of discipline among students in special education. The focus of this study was to contribute to the knowledge base on this topic and to provide school leaders with not only research-based options they can implement when it comes to equitable intervention strategies, but also data on whether or not the intervention has shown to be successful within the first few years of implementation.
**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a reduction in the rates of discipline disproportionality of students in special education is observable within the first 2 years of an intentional discipline reform strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports. The goal of this research is to provide school leaders with data on whether or not one middle school’s intentional alternative-to-suspension strategy can reduce disproportionate discipline rates among already disadvantaged student groups, such as students in special education. Additionally, the aim of this research is to help school leaders in schools of similar demographics determine if a comparable strategy would be a valuable use of their resources.

**Methodology Overview**

The method used in this research study was a quantitative analysis of secondary discipline data for one particular middle school located in southwest Washington. Data collected from Evergreen Public Schools, accounting for 2 school years before reform, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, and 2 years after discipline reform, 2016-2017 and 2017-2018, were analyzed. White and Sabarwal (2014) stated in an article about quasi-experimental research designs that, if data being analyzed are pre- and post-intervention and the sample is not random, a quasi-experimental design is recommended. Since the school’s discipline policies were changed to reduce suspensions, this practice can be seen as an intervention justifying the use of a quasi-experimental design. The data collected in this study pertained to disproportionality that had been created from the overexposure of student groups to out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, and expulsions. The
emphasis of the data collection and analysis was concentrated on students in special education.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to guide this study and to answer key questions related to this study:

- **RQ1:** Does implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, increase or decrease discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

- **RQ2:** Will implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, result in a meaningful change in discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

**Study Limitations**

There are a few variables that created unavoidable limitations for this study. One limitation of this study was the subjectivity of each of the three school leaders at the sample middle school when it came to assigning student discipline. Each of the three school leaders oversaw a particular grade level when it came to responding to behavioral referrals from teachers. While the school district highly encourages their leaders to use alternatives to suspension, as outlined in district policy, one of these leaders could have chosen to use an exclusionary discipline option instead.
In addition to the discretion of the leaders when assigning discipline, another limitation of this study was student mobility. Because of the revolving door nature of student enrollments and withdrawals, cohorts of students are almost always in a constant state of flux. As a result, student cohorts would differ slightly from one school year to the next.

The final limitation two this study is that the alternative-to-suspension strategy is comprised of several different interventions. The Whytry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and continuation of academics supports are all interwoven into the Studen Sucsess Academy. As a result, it will be difficult to pinpoint if a specific intervention will result in changes or to discipline disproportionality or if all interventions are needed.

**Delimitations**

The problem of disproportionate discipline affects a variety of student groups, most notably African Americans, Hispanics, and students in special education. While it is important to ensure that students have equitable opportunities to learn, this study focused specifically on students in special education. Limiting the study to one student group not only serves to establish boundaries, but also adds new knowledge to the field, as students in special education are often omitted from research, while numerous studies have been dedicated to student inequality among racial minorities (Anyon et al., 2014; González, 2015)
The particular middle school selected for this study was intentional. While there are four other middle schools in this school district on which discipline data could be collected, the specifics of how they handle their discipline may not have been consistent between schools. By focusing on one middle school, with approximately 1,080 students, the integrity of the data could be maintained.

Finally, the school years selected to provide discipline disproportionality data were strategic. The strategies chosen by the middle school studied were initiated at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. As a result, current post-reform data were collected for the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. Two years of pre-reform data were also collected to compare the rates of change. These included the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

Below are definitions for the terms used in this study.

*Community service:* Wood (2013) defined community service as the act of allocating time and labor to assist in the improvement of the community, as he stated in his study on getting the community involved in restorative justice. Woods also stated that community service can be either voluntary or mandated as a means of restitution to repair a wrongdoing that has been done by an individual to the community.

*Discipline disproportionality:* Discipline disproportionality, as defined by Gray (2016) in an article about student groups being disciplined at different rates, refers to the degree of difference in discipline that one student race or group receives as a whole in comparison to other groups. The data that contribute to disproportionality rates are based
on out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, and expulsions, as these are the only infractions documented in the school’s database.

*Individuals With Disabilities Education Act:* According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2014), the IDEA is the federal legislation passed in 1975 that provides special education rights and protections for students ages 3-21 in special education services.

*In-school suspension:* Noltemeyer, Ward, and Mcloughlin (2015) defined in-school suspensions as the act of removing students from their regular learning environment as a disciplinary consequence and placing them in an alternate and supervised setting where they cannot disrupt other students. This removal is typically done for an entire day and is documented on the students’ permanent records.

*Manifest determination review:* The manifest determination review is a critical component of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) that comes into play when a student in special education is suspended for the 10th time within a single school year for behavior that may be related to their disability, according to research by Lewis (2017). The manifest determination review is a formal meeting where parents, teachers, and the school psychologist meet to determine if the behavior has a direct relationship to the student’s disability. If the behavior is determined to be a manifestation of the disability, a functional behavior assessment is completed, and a behavioral intervention plan is put into place. The initial discipline that was assigned is then overturned, and the student is allowed to return to school. If the manifest determination review process determined that the behavior is not related to their disability, the suspension or expulsion would be upheld (Lewis, 2017).
Restorative practices: Wachtel (2013), Founder of the International Institute of Restorative Practices, defined restorative practices as a philosophy that emphasizes the value of community and seeks to find meaningful ways for individuals to repair harms they may have committed against community members. This process is done as a means of making things right between those who have been harmed and those who have caused harm, and it aims to reintegrate individuals back into their community after a conflict.

Social and emotional learning: Social and emotional learning, as defined by Kendziora and Yoder (2016), refers to skills taught to students to help them manage their actions and impulses. These lessons usually include teaching self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

Student mobility: Student mobility refers to the phenomenon that schools face of frequent enrollment changes in their student populations throughout the school year, as Dupere et al. (2014) defined in their research on children’s social adjustment.

WhyTry curriculum: Alvarez and Anderson-Ketchmark (2009) defined WhyTry as a social-emotional learning curriculum design that teaches students resilience and how to overcome a difficult challenge they may face at school. Some of these lessons include anger management, removing negative labels, and avoiding peer pressure.

Summary

Numerous federal policies have been created to ensure that students in special education receive equitable access to learning (ESSA 2015; IDEA, 2004). Despite having these policies in place, students in special education are being suspended at the highest rate of all student groups (Gregory, Hafen, et al., 2016). School leaders play a large role in providing equitable learning opportunities for all students (Datnow et al., 2017).
However, when it comes to accessing researched-based alternatives to suspension strategies for these students, studies are limited (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016).

As a result of these issues, the primary goal of this research study was to determine whether a reduction in the rates of discipline disproportionality of students in special education was observable within the first 2 years of an intentional discipline reform strategy based on the use of an alternative-to-suspension strategy that incorporates social-emotional learning. An examination of secondary discipline data collected from sixth- to eighth-grade students enrolled in a middle school in Evergreen Public Schools between 2014 and 2018 was conducted to determine if the school’s new discipline reform efforts involving the use of alternatives to suspension combined with social-emotional learning are reducing the discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education.

Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive review of the literature on this topic that examines not only the history of this issue, but also highlights past studies conducted on this topic. Chapter 2 will include including the following sections: (a) Gaps in Research, (b) Theoretical Framework, (c) Historical Context, (d) Alternative Approaches to Managing Student Behaviors, (e) Current Research on the Problem, (f) Responsibility of School Leaders, and (g) Summary.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the issues of inequity among students in public school special education programs. Also, this review includes research that furthers the topic of discipline disproportionality and why this issue continues to exist despite having federal protections in place to prevent exclusion (IDEA, 2004). Finally, this review of the literature was designed to help determine what behavior intervention strategies have been implemented, whether they have shown to be successful, and what areas still need to be explored to help provide these students with equitable opportunities for learning.

Providing equitable learning opportunities for all students is a paramount duty for leaders working within the field of public education, as Datnow et al. (2017) stated in their research about the needs for leaders to use data to overcome issues of equity. While it may be assumed that current programs are fulfilling these obligations, Datnow and Park (2015), in a study about the correlation between data and equity, suggested that leaders should review data regularly to confirm this is indeed the case and adjust as needed.

One area within the field of public education receiving a lot of attention and scrutiny when it comes to the discussion of equity is school leaders’ use of exclusionary discipline among minorities and students in special education (Rocque & Snellings, 2017). Current research on school discipline practices shows that there are groups of students who are suspended at disproportionate rates in comparison to others. Losen et al. (2015), in their research examining the relationship between racial disparities, special education, and school inequities in school discipline, mentioned that across the nation, the highest rates of discipline disproportionality are found among students with
disabilities who are enrolled in secondary education. The use of exclusionary discipline consequences, such as suspensions and expulsions, removes students from their classrooms and ultimately limits their opportunities to learn. What is unique about this problem is that this disproportionality is happening despite federal protections that have been put in place to prevent it (Anyon et al., 2014).

Recent changes in educational legislation, as outlined in the ESSA (2015), require states to obtain discipline data from all schools who receive federal funding. Because of ESSA requirements, schools have also been asked to create and implement plans to limit their use of suspensions and expulsions. Hernandez-Melis et al. (2016) highlighted that very few studies have focused on evaluating interventions aimed at reducing suspensions and expulsions among students receiving special education services.

As a result of the new ESSA requirement, school leaders have begun implementing intervention strategies without researching whether they have proven to be successful in schools with similar demographics. In research examining ways to eliminate disparities in school discipline, Gregory et al. (2017) stated that ESSA had prompted many school leaders to engage in “implement and hope” (p. 258) strategies. The problem with this method is that, in the field of public education, best practice would recommend the use of data-driven decision making to find and implement appropriate interventions that have been proven successful in schools of similar demographics (Datnow et al., 2017). Additionally, Gregory et al. (2017) stated that strategies implemented without research are not likely to show a reduction in discipline disparities.

Providing equitable opportunities to learning is a crucial element to successful school management that educational leaders are responsible for making (Datnow et al.,
2017). Additionally, federal regulations guarantee that students in special education receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as set forth by the IDEA (2004). In addition to concerns that these students are not receiving an adequate education, schools can lose federal funding if these requirements are not met. It is also crucial that educational leaders know what interventions have been effective in reducing instances of disproportionality, especially in the areas of student discipline.

This chapter contains several primary sections: (a) Gaps in Research, (b) Theoretical Framework, (c) Historical Context of Education of Students With Disabilities and Discipline Disproportionality of Students in Special Education, (d) Historical Context of Discipline Disproportionality, (e) Discipline Policy Reform and Interventions, (f) Current Research on the Topic, (g) Leadership Responsibilities, and (h) Summary of the Chapter.

**Gaps in Research**

When it comes to reviewing research data on the reduction of discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education, there are noticeable gaps in the research. Hernandez-Melis et al. (2016) noted that one of the biggest issues they observed was the lack of research documenting the results of alternative-to-suspension strategies for students with disabilities. Additionally, the concept of analyzing discipline data on students in special education makes its most prominent appearance as a recommendation for future research at the conclusion of most studies (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). Because of this frequent disposition, this topic has become one of several driving forces in this study and literature review.
As introduced in Chapter 1, the most current research on alternative-to-suspension strategies similar to those being used in the study has been in the Denver Public Schools (Anyon et al., 2014; González, 2015). Like Evergreen Public Schools, Denver Public Schools modified school policies in 2008 to mandate the use of alternatives to suspension and chose to use restorative practices and social-emotional learning as the primary strategy to reduce suspensions. However, one key difference between the two school districts is that Denver Public Schools relied heavily on the use of in-school suspensions as their primary alternative to suspension. The two research questions Anyon et al.’s (2014) study aimed to examine were: (a) if race contributed to an increase in the frequency of discipline; and (b) if alternatives to suspension, such as the use of restorative practices and in-school suspensions, reduced out-of-school suspensions.

The study in Denver relied on examining secondary discipline data from all K-12 students from school years 2008-2009 through 2011-2012. Anyon et al. (2014) stated that the study confirmed that over 4 years (2008-2012), suspensions were reduced by 40%. Additionally, Anyon et al. confirmed that if students were African American, Hispanic, or of low socioeconomic status, they were more likely to get suspended than White students. Anyon et al. did not include data on students in special education, stating those students had federal protections in place to prevent excessive discipline. Anyon et al. also stated that they were not able to find research indicating that students with disabilities were at a higher risk of suspension. The researchers concluded the study by stating that future research would benefit from examining whether alternatives to suspension, using restorative practice approaches, could reduce the discipline disproportionality rates between student groups (Anyon et al., 2014).
To further the work of Anyon et al. (2014), González (2015) took the future research suggestion and conducted a study on whether or not alternatives to suspension based on restorative practice approaches could reduce the discipline disproportionality rates between student groups. González analyzed secondary discipline data on K-12 students in the Denver Public Schools for school years 2006-2007 through 2012-2013. However, data were only collected and analyzed for African American, Hispanic, and White students; a reduction in discipline rates was observed among these groups. In this study, González (2015) stated that between 2006 and 2013, suspension rates for African American students decreased from 17.6% to 7.2%, rates for Hispanic Students decreased from 10.2% to 5.4%, and rates for White students decreased from 5.9% to 2.3%. While these rates seem to confirm that alternatives to suspension based on restorative practices reduced disproportionality rates, key student groups like those of low socioeconomic status and students in special education were completely omitted from the study.

While discipline data on students in special education from across the nation have shown that they are suspended or expelled from school at the highest rate of all students, as Kramarczuk-Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius (2017) found in their research on pursuing equity within special education, it appears that research on how to reduce these rates continues to be overlooked or recommended for further research (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). This goal of this study is to bridge the gap in the lack of literature and research on reducing discipline disparity among students in special education and to contribute to the field by providing data on whether an alternative-to-suspension program based on the use of restorative practices can reduce the rates of disproportionality. As the studies in this research have shown, just because a subgroup of students has federal
protections from the overuse of exclusionary discipline does not mean they are immune from becoming exposed to it.

**Theoretical Framework**

To further guide this research, it is necessary to detail the theoretical framework that was used. In a seminal book on designing quantitative research, Maxwell (2013) stated that the theoretical framework of a study is necessary to help articulate how the new research fits into what is already known about a problem and how the new research will add or contribute to the topic under study. Additionally, the theoretical framework serves to organize and guide the research by connecting related concepts (Maxwell, 2013).

The theoretical framework for this study was guided by research on a variety of interrelated concepts. The primary concept for this research was disability studies. Linton (2005) stated, in an article defining the nature of disability studies, that this form of study is based on the principle of inclusion and the reintegration of people with disabilities back into the community, acknowledging that they have roles in society. Furthermore, the goal of research based on disability studies is to shift the lens, which is typically focused on those with disabilities, to the nondisabled population, as a means to identify barriers that may hinder inclusion within the community and to locate strategies that may be successful in overcoming those barriers (Linton, 2005).

Since the public schools functioned as the “community” in this research, an additional concept that guided this study was disability studies in education. In research examining how to advance the rights of students with disabilities, Corcoran, White, and Whitburn (2015) articulated that disability studies in education use a multidisciplinary
research approach to identify patterns in discipline and methodology. The purpose of this is to ensure the rights of people with disabilities and provide them access to not only participate, but also to be successful in public education.

The remaining concepts that made up the foundations of the theoretical framework for this study concentrated on the roles and responsibilities that school leaders have in providing equitable learning opportunities for all students under their supervision. A few of the critical areas within this category are the need for evaluating the disciplinary practices of school leaders, analyzing disparities between student groups, including students in special education, and finding data-driven, research-based interventions to reduce the disparities. The final goal used to guide this research was the role that school leaders have in interpreting and conforming to federal legislation when it comes to civil right protections.

**Historical Context**

The problem of students in special education being excluded from school at higher rates than nondisabled students is rooted in several areas. To make sure all these areas are articulated individually, the Historical Context section is broken into several sections. These sections include (a) Educating Students With Disabilities, and (b) Disproportionality of Discipline.

**Educating Students With Disabilities**

In *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), a momentous decision was made in the field of public education that would set a precedent for equitable learning opportunities for all students. While this decision primarily focused on the rejection of the separate but equal education of African American students, its message resonated with many other
student groups, as Triplett, Allen, and Lewis (2014) stated in their study on zero tolerance and the post-\textit{Brown vs. Board of Education} quest for equity in discipline. In their research examining the history and advocacy of special education, Spaulding and Pratt (2015) stated the \textit{Brown vs. Board of Education} (1954) decision was about more than just the Civil Rights Movement—it acknowledged that discrimination based on any unalterable human characteristic is unconstitutional. In addition to protecting students from racial discrimination, females and students diagnosed with disabilities were now explicitly included in policy (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Before the \textit{Brown vs. Board of Education} (1954) decision, students with disabilities were not guaranteed to receive education and were at the mercy of local governing authorities to establish guidelines on if and how they would be educated, as Poucher (2015) noted in a study on the correlation between the road to prison and behavior intervention plans. While the \textit{Brown vs. Board of Education} decision was beneficial to opening the doors to equity for these students, it took an additional 20 years to develop legislation with language that specifically focused on detailed rights for students in special education (Lusk, 2015). Chamusco (2017) stated, in a study about laws that preceded the discrimination movement, that the first measure that specifically prohibited the discrimination of those diagnosed with disabilities in federally funded programs was the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. While the Rehabilitation Act was meant to cover all those diagnosed with disabilities, lawmakers decided to revise legislation again and added language specifically to address children with disabilities. In research examining the need to revisit current special education policies, Lewis (2017) stated that, before 1975, schools typically chose to exclude students with disabilities from
enrollment, which circumvented the provisions of the Rehabilitation Act. Because of these practices, the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed, which would be revised in 1990 and renamed to its current form, the IDEA (Lewis, 2017).

The IDEA has become the guiding legislation for all special education rights within the public school system. Poucher (2015) emphasized, in a study about the need for creating appropriate behavioral intervention plans for students with disabilities, that the IDEA’s sole function was to guarantee that students receiving special education services receive what IDEA refers to as a “free and public education,” or FAPE.

Free and public education has become one of the most important and debated elements of the IDEA (Poucher, 2015). In research exploring the implementation of individualized education programs, Zirkel and Bauer (2016) stated that most litigations involving students in special education come from a failure to provide appropriate public education.

One of FAPE’s primary objectives is the removal of students from their original learning environment. Lusk (2015) stated that if students in special education are removed from their normal classrooms for more than 10 days cumulatively within a school year for disciplinary behavior associated with their disability, it is a violation of FAPE. After a student has reached a total of 10 days of suspension for the year, a manifest determination review meeting is to be held to determine if the behavior is indeed part of the student’s disability. If the behavior is deemed to be the manifestation of a disability, the student is allowed to return to school, and a behavioral intervention plan is put in place to support future success. If the behavior is not deemed to be a part of the student's disability, the student’s suspension may be upheld (IDEA, 2004).
One major critique of FAPE is that some people feel that school leaders take advantage of the 10 days before having to hold a manifest determination review. Shaver and Decker (2017) conducted research examining campus police officers’ interactions with students with disabilities and found that school leaders tend to use the 10 days prior to manifest determination review provisions kicking in as “free” days during which they can suspend students in special education without having to account for whether the behavior was a part of their disability. As a result of this potential for abuse, several researchers are advocating for additional modifications to the language of FAPE and the manifest determination review process to prevent the potential abuse of these 10 days (Lewis, 2017).

Besides concerns about the abuse of the 10 days prior to holding a manifest determination review meeting, there have been additional concerns about the manifest determination review process. The majority of these issues are associated with inconsistencies in the process and the subjectivity of those who participate in the manifest determination review (Lewis, 2017). Poucher (2015) suggested that as a result of unclear guidelines from Congress on special education protections, the schools and the court are often confused on how to proceed appropriately with the discipline of students in special education.

**Disproportionality of Discipline**

Despite numerous federal protections established to keep students receiving special education services in school for behaviors related to their disability, these students continue to be excluded disproportionately compared to other student groups (Kramarczuk-Voulgarides et al., 2017). When it comes to addressing discipline within the
public school setting, one of the most notable policies that changed the landscape of student behavior management was the adoption of the Reagan Administration’s zero-tolerance policies by public schools in the late 1980s, as noted by Skiba (2014) in his study on the failure of zero-tolerance policies. In researching strategies to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline, Wilson (2014) stated that as a result of zero-tolerance policies and the eventual incorporation of the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, school leaders began revising their discipline policies for suspension and expulsion of students for infractions that the school would have handled in the past with minor consequences. Under these strict rules, a student could now be suspended for insubordinations, disrupting class, or even dress-code violations (Wilson, 2014).

To compound the issues of overly punitive responses to minor behaviors, school districts also started communicating with law enforcement agencies to create a police presence on campus. In Ramey’s (2015) research on the social structure of criminalized and medicalized school discipline, it was noted that as a result of this collaboration with law enforcement, the concept of the school resource officer was created. While the school resource officer’s primary task was to deter school violence, these officers started to be included in the school’s disciplinary process. Wolf (2013) examined the arrest decisions made by school resource officers and found that schools with school resource officers on campus were more likely to have students arrested for behavior that would normally be handled by the school. As a result of exposing students to the criminal justice system for their behavior, a new issue arose, which the National Council on Disability (2015) refers to as the school-to-prison pipeline.
Not only were students receiving discipline from school, but they were being arrested and introduced to the local criminal justice system (Rocque & Snelling, 2017). Coincidentally, the rates associated with being introduced to the school-to-prison pipeline are disproportionate between student groups and mirror rates seen with school discipline disproportionality (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). The school-to-prison pipeline is a recent phenomenon where students are not only being discipline by school leaders for their deviant behaviors but are also being referred to the criminal justice system for criminal prosecution (Rocque & Snellings, 2017). This phenomenon has been linked to the increased practice school leaders hiring law enforcement officers to serve as security officers (Shaver, 2017). According to research by Wilson (2014), African Americans, Hispanics, and students in special education were 2 to 3 times more likely to be introduced to the school-to-prison pipeline than their White and nondisabled counterparts.

The era of punitive public education continued until approximately 2011. In research focused on replacing zero-tolerance policies with alternatives to suspension, Advocacy and Communication Solutions (2014) stated that California, Colorado, Maryland, North Carolina, and Oregon had passed laws to overturn zero-tolerance policies due to the harm it was causing their students. In current times, zero-tolerance policies are only applicable if a student brings a firearm to school.

Alternative Approaches to Managing Student Behaviors

The methods that school leaders have used to manage student behaviors has varied substantially over time. While most of the tactics have been responsive, there are a few proactive methods in use. The following section details alternative-to-suspension
strategies mentioned in the study on the Evergreen Public Schools and for Denver Public Schools, which is the most current similar study on the problem. This section provides insight into what interventions were used and some research on the outcomes resulting from implementation.

**In-School Suspension**

Many schools have chosen to use in-school suspensions as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions. In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014), it was determined that during the 2011-2012 school year, school leaders across the United States assigned 3.45 million students from all demographic backgrounds to out-of-school suspensions. During that same timeframe, an additional 3.5 million students received in-school suspensions.

While students assigned to in-school suspensions remain in school for their consequences, they are still removed from their learning environments. As a result, not only do students who are assigned in-school suspensions receive lower grade point averages (GPAs), but they are still disproportionately represented at levels that parallel out-of-school suspensions. For example, students in special education are referred to in-school suspension at the rate of 1.82 times that of their nondisabled peers, as stated by Cholewa et al. (2017) in a study examining the outcomes associated with the use of in-school suspension. Noltemeyer et al. (2015) stated that while out-of-school suspension has received the most attention for its negative student outcomes, in-school suspension has not received scrutiny, as many stakeholders assume that if students remain in school, they are less affected by the consequence. However, little research has been dedicated to examining potential harm (Noltemeyer et al., 2015).
While in-school suspension may be an easy-to-implement alternative for many schools looking for a way to comply with policies, there are questions on whether this strategy is effective in reducing overall discipline rates and the disproportionality of discipline rates between student groups. Cholewa et al. (2017) conducted research that claimed to be the first of its kind, analyzing the use of in-school suspension as a means of reducing discipline disproportionality among students in special education. Cholewa et al. determined that in-school suspension generates similar outcomes to out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

**Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports**

A newer tactic in student behavior management that has been observed in schools over the last decade is positive behavior intervention supports (PBIS; Sugai et al., 2016). Positive behavior intervention supports is a proactive behavior management framework that incorporates the use of social-emotional learning to teach students what behaviors are expected of them and also acknowledges when students are caught demonstrating the desired expectations (Gregory et al., 2017). Gage, Grasey-Boy, and George (2018) stated that PBIS has shown to be highly effective in reducing problematic behaviors of students and the number of suspensions that schools assign.

Sometimes referred to as a multtiered system of supports, the PBIS framework uses a three-tiered approach to manage student behavior (see Figure 2.1). Tier 1, or school-wide PBIS, aims to teach students several core values on which the school has decided to focus. Lynass, Tsai, and Cheney (2012) conducted a study examining school-
wide PBIS and the creation of behavior matrices and stated that 60% of schools using PBIS use the default core values that emphasize respect, responsibility, and safety. Once a school has chosen its core values, it begins to train the students on what it looks like to exhibit these values in various locations throughout the school. These social-emotional learning lessons are conducted through assemblies, announcements, and PBIS-related classroom projects, and teachers and other staff then recognize and reward students when they are caught demonstrating these values. The goal of the Tier 1 strategy is to impact 80% of the students through the various teaching techniques.

The second tier in PBIS aims to reach the remaining 20% of students, which is accomplished by creating small group interventions. The interventions used are completely up to the school to create. However, in exploration on the effectiveness of Tier 2 PBIS on academics and behavior, Toms, Campbell-Whatley, Stuart, and Schultz (2018) stated in their research on behavioral interventions for African American males,
that the check-in/check-out program is one of the only empirically based PBIS interventions shown to be successful in reducing behavioral issues among students. As a result, it has become the primary Tier 2 intervention for many schools.

With check-in/check-out, students are assigned a mentor staff member who they check in with every morning. The student, with mentor guidance, determines a specific goal for the day. The student then takes a check-in/check-out tracker sheet around to all of the day’s classes. At the end of each class, the student is scored on how well they met the school's core values and the written personal goals. Finally, at the end of the day, the student checks out with the mentor by reviewing their progress for the day. If the student has met the goal, some sort of incentive is provided by the mentor.

The final PBIS tier focuses on the 5% of students who were not successfully reached by Tier 1 and 2 interventions. To have the most impact on these students, individual interventions are used. Principals, deans, counselors, and student advocates typically take on this task as needed. Tier 3 supports look different in every school based on the resources they have available.

**WhyTry**

WhyTry is a social-emotional learning curriculum designed to help K-12 students overcome the challenges they may face at school. In their research, Wilhite and Bullock (2012) emphasized the WhyTry social skills program, and for students who have emotional or behavioral problems, the social-emotional learning and positive social outcomes associated with its use are crucial for the emotional development of students. Furthermore, incorporating social-emotional learning into classroom lessons has shown
to increase academic performance, decrease behavioral problems, and improve relationships in the classroom (Wilhite & Bullock, 2012).

To facilitate social-emotional learning, the WhyTry curriculum includes 10 lessons with visual analogies that help to reinforce targeted skills that students may lack. These skills include: (a) understanding of decisions and consequences, (b) removing negative labels and showcasing positive traits, (c) positive coping skills, (d) managing peer pressure, (e) problem solving, (f) time and commitment, (g) creating positive opportunities out of challenges, (h) self-discipline, (i) establishing a system of support, and (j) using multiple tools to achieve personal goals. These lessons include hands-on learning and incorporates the use of music, video, and physical activities to help students learn the desired skills using a multisensory approach. Additionally, since the WhyTry curriculum targets students who are lagging in social-emotional learning, it can be used by schools as a Tier 2 or 3 PBIS intervention, as in the case of the sample school in this study.

The WhyTry organization provides a list of research demonstrating the success of the WhyTry curriculum. WhyTry (n.d.) claims that middle schools have shown a decrease in student referrals by 13% and an increase in their GPAs. Additionally, in a WhyTry field study, Elliot (2016) stated that over 5 years, referrals decreased by 58.4%, fights decreased by 57%, and suspensions decreased by 31%. However, neither of these data sets appear to be scholarly or scientific research, nor does there appear to be much research outside of theses and doctoral dissertations.
**Restorative Practices**

Another behavior management strategy that has been around since the 1970s, but that has only recently been used in U.S. schools, is restorative practices. In an article about defining the nature of restorative practices, which originated from indigenous tribes in New Zealand, Wachtel (2013), the founder of the International Institute of Restorative Practices, stated that the restorative practices philosophy has been used by criminal justice agencies across the world as a way to repair the harm between crime victims and their offenders. Gregory, Clawson, et al. (2016) stated, in research on the use of restorative practices to transform student-teacher relationships and achieve equity in school discipline, that the primary technique used in restorative practices is establishing and maintaining a sense of community.

When an incident occurs that harms relationships within the community, restorative practices bring together everyone who may have been affected by the incident, and they collaboratively come up with a peaceful and meaningful way for the harm to be repaired. In Armour’s (2016) research on righting the wrongs of exclusionary discipline, it was stated that the restorative practices philosophy is based on the idea of establishing and maintaining a sense of community by the building of meaningful and trusting relationships between those within the community. When someone’s actions cause harm to the community, the harm needs to be repaired so that harmony can be reestablished and so that everyone involved feels welcome within that community (Armour, 2016).

The restorative practices philosophy has a continuum of recommended techniques that help to build and maintain community (see Figure 2.2). The continuum is designed to include 80% proactive strategies and 20% responsive strategies. What this means is that
80% of the strategies are meant to shape behavior before an incident happens, while the other 20% is used to repair the harms of a behavior. The continuum of practices includes the use of affective statements, affective questions, small impromptu conferences, groups or circles, and formal conferences (Wachtel, 2013).

The first of the five techniques in the continuum of restorative practices is using affective statements. Gregory, Clawson, et al. (2016) stated that affective statements involve verbalizing emotions to communicate how one feels about both positive and negative occurrences. The goal of this practice is to help develop empathy and trust among those within the community.

The second technique in the continuum of restorative practices is the use of affective/restorative questions (see Table 2.1). Anyon (2016) stated, in research on the school-wide implementation of restorative practices, that affective questions are a scripted set of questions used to guide and maintain constructive conversations. These include questions aimed at identifying what harm was done, who was affected by the incident, what they have thought about since the incident occurred, and what needs to be done to make things right between all of those involved (Anyon, 2016). The goal of these practices is to teach students how to resolve problems among themselves (with adult guidance), which avoids the presence of an authority figure handing out decisions on their behavior.
The third technique in the restorative practices continuum is small impromptu conferences. These conferences use the affective questions and are initiated when minor issues arise. These are most often used to diffuse issues staff may encounter during unstructured times like passing time between classes (Wachtel, 2013). Impromptu conferences are typically short by nature, only taking a few minutes to conduct, and are a technique used to de-escalate potential problems. If the issue demands more attention, a restorative circle may be facilitated between the individuals involved.

The fourth technique in the continuum focuses on the use of restorative circles, or informal restorative conferencing. This is the first strategy within the restorative practices continuum that shifts from proactive to responsive interventions. This can be done as a class in response to a violation of community norms or in private between a few individuals. In a study about the outcomes of restorative circle programs in schools, Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, and Espelage (2016) stated that there is limited research on the school-based applications of restorative circles in the United States. However,
Lyubansky et al. (2016) reported that research from Brazil indicated a 93% satisfaction rate from staff and students when using restorative circles to resolve conflicts.

The final technique in the restorative practices continuum is formal conferencing. Formal conferences are used for the most severe issues and often require the participation of numerous members of the community. According to Wachtel (2013), these conferences are designed to give those harmed by an act the opportunity to confront those who have caused the harm and to let them know how they feel about what happened to them, ask questions about the incident, and have input into what they need the “offender” to do to repair the relationship. Similar to other restorative techniques, formal restorative conferences rely heavily on the use of affective questions to help those who have been harmed and those who have done harm and to describe what happened, who was affected by the actions, and what can be done to repair the harm (Wachtel, 2013)

**Community Service**

Another strategy that has been associated with the consequences of student misbehavior is the use of community service. In the last decade, community service in the educational setting has evolved into an intentional and meaningful strategy. In research on the influence of race on restorative discipline, Payne and Welch (2013) stated that due to the influence of the restorative practice philosophy, community service has transitioned from a broad service to providing service directly to those affected by the actions of another. For example, if a student were to vandalize bathroom stalls, and a custodian had to take time from their normal duties to clean it up, that student would eventually repair the harm by performing community service that directly assisted the custodian. In this new direction of community service, the misbehavior is viewed as a
barrier hindering the relationship between those who have caused harm and those who have been harmed (Payne & Welch, 2013). To repair the relationship between both parties, the community service must directly benefit the person who was harmed. In the past, community service often was used only as a punitive measure and lacked this critical component.

Another element of modern community service in schools is that the service must be voluntary. Forced community service not only fails to mend broken relationships but could also violate child labor laws. However, some states (e.g., Washington) have been revising policy to make the use of restorative community service the norm. In a study on soliciting community buy-in for restorative justice through the use of restorative community service, Wood (2015) stated that many juvenile justice departments have seen added value in moving from involving juveniles in service like roadside litter crews to conducting service that benefits those whom they have harmed. In 2001, the Clark County Juvenile Justice Department became one of the early adopters of this philosophy (Wood, 2015). Clark County also happens to be where the school in this study is located and may be why community service in schools has become an acceptable practice.

**Current Research on the Problem**

When it comes to studies aimed explicitly at discipline reform and the reduction of suspensions, as outlined by ESSA, one unique challenge is locating research-driven interventions that have proven to be effective. According to research by Gregory et al. (2017), the current problem is the rate at which discipline interventions are implemented. Currently, the number of interventions implemented by school leaders surpasses the ability for them to be measured for success.
Annamma, Morrison, and Jackson (2014) suggested that interventions such as those that involve restorative practice components, as well as interventions limiting the use of suspension to the most egregious incidents, may be beneficial to reducing disproportionalities in the discipline. Anyon et al. (2014) conducted a study within the Denver Public Schools on the effects of a discipline reform measure that focused on the use of restorative practices and alternatives to suspension. Anyon et al. collected data on students in a variety of settings, including elementary, middle, high, and alternative schools. Anyon et al. noted that middle school behavioral incidents were much more prevalent than in other settings. After analyzing post-reform data, they concluded that their alternative-to-suspension strategies protected students from exclusionary discipline. They also noted that one of the significant factors in their success was having policies in place that advocated change.

In Anyon et al.’s. (2014) research, data on particular student groups, including students living in poverty, English language learners, and students in special education, were omitted, as preliminary findings indicated these groups were not at any additional risk of being disciplined. Anyon et al. also mentioned these variables had not reliably been associated with school discipline outcomes in other studies. This is in contradiction to numerous statements from researchers who have analyzed discipline disproportionality data, including data collected from the U.S. Department of Education, which have indicated to the scholars that students in special education are at an increased risk for disproportionate discipline (Losen et al., 2015).

To further the work of Anyon et al. (2014), González (2015) conducted a secondary data analysis of student discipline in Denver Public Schools from 2006-2013,
where Anyon et al.’s work was limited to data from 2008-2012. As with the previous study, the data focused on racial disproportionality; students who were in special programs were not included. González noted that, in 2003, Denver Public Schools implemented a discipline reform measure rooted in the restorative practices philosophy. However, in 2008, the policy was further revised to incorporate more restorative practices implementation and to advocate for the use of alternatives to suspension instead of exclusion. González noted that suspension rates and disproportionality of discipline between student groups had declined steadily since 2006.

Data collected from both studies focused exclusively on post-reform measures, regardless of which reform version was used. Neither of the researchers in these studies analyzed discipline data pre-reform, nor did they compare the data for signs of change because of their reform efforts. Instead, the research focused on data beginning 3 to 5 years into implementation.

Hernandez-Melis et al. (2016) claimed that their study on behavioral interventions was the first of its kind, as it focused specifically on students in special education. In their study, students in special education who had engaged in physical violence or drug use were exposed to a single day of social-emotional learning through a program called Building Bridges, which centered on the restorative practice philosophy. The goal of the study was to determine if recidivism rates among these students would decrease because of the class. Hernandez-Melis et al. discovered that the alternatives to suspension chosen for this study had a high potential for reducing recidivism rates among students with disabilities.
Responsibility of School Leaders

Leaders in the field of public education have many challenges to overcome to run a successful school or school district. One of the most challenging issues seen across the nation is the ability to provide equitable learning experiences for all students (Datnow et al., 2017). This is especially true when it comes to protected groups like students in special education.

Another substantial challenge for school leadership is acquiring appropriate information to guide data-driven decision making. While data-driven decision making has become a voluntary but recommended practice for leaders within the field of public education, interventions geared at helping students in special education require data-driven decisions, per the requirements of the IDEA (2004). School leaders are responsible for implementing programs that are peer-reviewed and in compliance with FAPE, even when a student in special education has been suspended (Katsiyannis, Counts, Popham, & Butzer, 2016).

Data-driven decision making is a crucial element in successful school planning. Marsh and Farrell (2014) stated in research on how leaders can support teachers by using data-driven decision making, that, due to the increased funding by policymakers and the greater emphasis on student accountability and achievement, school leaders are now encouraged and, in many cases, expected to collect and analyze a variety of performance-related data to help guide decisions aimed at improving student success. The purpose of this practice is to help hold school leaders accountable for using public funds on efficient and effective interventions (Marsh & Farrell, 2014).
When it comes to interventions aimed at modifying discipline, research by Cholewa et al. (2017) suggested data-driven decision making be used to ensure that the implementation of disciplinary alternatives can occur without causing more harm than good. Gregory et al. (2017) stated that in many circumstances, when there is a problem that needs to be addressed and minimal time to gather data, school leaders tended to throw interventions at the issues with an “implement and hope” (p. 258) mentality. Researchers have documented that the implement-and-hope strategy rarely works in the school’s favor, and schools need to find time to research interventions before implementing them (Gregory et al., 2017).

Researchers have indicated that despite federal protections to provide a FAPE for students in special education, equitable learning opportunities for these students are not produced as a result of these measures alone (Kramarczuk-Voulgarides et al., 2017). Additionally, researchers from across the country have indicated that students in special education continue to be the highest disciplined groups of students at all grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

New educational policies that focus on accountability are mandating that schools report discipline rates to the states and come up with a plan for how to reduce exclusionary discipline. As a result, many school leaders are beginning to use interventions without having any data on their success. According to federal policy, school leaders should refrain from implementing interventions that are not data driven or peer reviewed (IDEA, 2004).

Many researchers have recommended a discipline reform strategy using components of the restorative practices philosophy and alternatives to suspension (Anyon
et al., 2014; González, 2015). While there have been several studies on this strategy, researchers have had little success or have omitted data on the reduction of discipline disproportionality among special education students.

**Summary**

Sixty-four years have passed since the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, and students in special education are still struggling to obtain an equitable education. Federal protections provided under IDEA and subsequent revisions have failed to guarantee students in special education a FAPE (Anyon et al., 2014). This review of literature included research in the areas of alternative approaches to managing student behaviors, equitable learning opportunities, discipline disproportionality, discipline policy reform, and school leaders’ responsibilities as they pertain to students in special education services in public school districts. However, what all of these studies have in common is a lack of consistency in research when it comes to analyzing reduction in discipline rates among students in special education.

Current disciplinary practices based on the use of suspensions and expulsions have created disproportionality in discipline rates between student groups. As a result of these circumstances, students in special education services are more likely to be suspended than any other student group (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These numbers have been seen as low as twice the rate of nondisabled students and as high as 4 times that (Losen et al., 2015).

Potential gaps in research revolve around providing educational leaders with peer-reviewed data on discipline reform measures that directly reduce discipline disproportionality among students in special education. To date, most of the research
conducted on discipline reform strategies has been centered on the general population of students or has only been disaggregated by race. Current researchers have suggested that future studies should focus on data-driven decision making and examining the impacts of disciplinary intervention reforms based on the use of restorative practices and alternatives to suspension and their effect on reducing discipline disparities with students in special education (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016).

Guided by future study recommendations from research in the areas of special education, discipline disproportionality, equity, and the responsibilities of school leaders, the goal of this study was to bridge research gaps by examining the effects that one middle school’s alternative-to-suspension strategy had on reducing disparities in discipline rates among students in special education.

The Student Success Academy helps students remain in school, while still being held accountable for their actions, by combining social-emotional learning through the use of the WhyTry curriculum and the restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports. To ensure that the academic supports were met during this time, the district hired a certified teacher to oversee the Student Success Academy. In this, the students have access to their general and special education curriculum.

In Chapter 3, a discussion on how this research was conducted is detailed. Not only will this chapter include why the research method and design were chosen, but the reasons why other methods were not applicable for use in this study will be examined. Chapter 3 will include the following sections: (a) Research Method, (b) Research Design,
(c) Participants, (d) Instruments, (e) Data Analysis Methods, (f) Limitations, (g) Delimitations, and (h) Summary.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The problem of disproportionate disciplinary rates and questions about equitable learning opportunities between student groups has become a growing concern across the nation, especially when it pertains to students in public school special education programs (Annamma et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the same federal policies created to protect students in special education has also limited research on the topic (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). The checks and balances associated with the IDEA and the FAPE provisions have created a false sense of equity among leaders within public school systems (Anyon et al., 2014).

Unless a school’s leadership team is intentionally searching for issues of inequity, they may be completely unaware of discipline disproportionality concerns present in their building. However, with the passing of the ESSA, school leaders, for the first time, are required to review data on their disciplinary practices and create plans to be more equitable (ESSA, 2015). When focusing on strategies directed toward students in special education, the IDEA requires interventions be research based. Since research-based interventions for these students are limited, a goal of this study is to contribute to the knowledge base of interventions targeted to assist students in special education (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016).

This study intended to address the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: Does implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, increase or
decrease discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

- RQ2: Will implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, result in a meaningful change in discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

In this chapter, details on the research method selected to address this problem is described in the following sections: (a) Research Method, (b) Research Design, (c) Participants, (d) Instruments, (e) Data Analysis Methods, (f) Limitations, (g) Delimitations, and (h) Summary.

**Research Method**

The research design selected for this study was based on quantitative research methods. The reason this method was chosen is that the research focused on the analysis of discipline data already collected by the Evergreen Public Schools. Creswell (2014) stated that quantitative research is used when the researcher is looking to examine variables that can be measured with numerical data and analyzed using statistical methods. Additionally, in an article about the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research methods, Choy (2014) stated that quantitative researchers cautiously collect and analyze data in a mathematical form to establish correlations between variables and results. An analysis of secondary discipline data was conducted to measure the amount of change, if any, that the school's recent discipline reform strategies
have on disproportionality rates. To facilitate this, a quantitative correlational research approach was necessary (Creswell, 2014).

A qualitative research method was not selected for this study, as the primary focus of qualitative research is to analyze the experiences and attitudes of participants who have been exposed to a variable (Creswell, 2014). McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) stated that qualitative research tends to generate words instead of numbers as the primary form of data. While participants’ experiences and perceptions about disproportionate discipline practices may be important, it is not within the parameters of the current study proposal.

A mixed-methods approach involves both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of data (Creswell, 2014). An example of this type of study, under the current context, would be if a researcher wanted to analyze the amount of change, if any, that a discipline reform strategy had on disproportionality rates, and how students’ lives had been altered as a result of the reform. While this would also be a beneficial study, the goal of this research is to provide school leaders with statistics on the potential change in discipline disproportionality rates, so they can decide if a similar strategy would be transferable to their schools.

**Research Design**

Since secondary student discipline data were collected from the school district, a specific quantitative research design was needed to proceed with the study and to process the data (Creswell, 2014). In an article about quasi-experimental research designs, White and Sabarwal (2014) stated that when studies involve participants who are not randomly assigned, and when the data to be analyzed is used to measure the impacts of an intervention, researchers should use a quasi-experimental design. Pre- and post-discipline
reform data were needed for this study to determine if the reform strategy resulted in a change in disproportionality rates among students in special education. Because of these factors, a quasi-experimental design was applicable (White & Sabarwal, 2014). Quasi-experimental research investigates the association between an intentional strategy and the outcomes associated with its implementation (Schweizer, Braun, & Milstone, 2016). Additionally, this study was considered ex-post facto research, as the discipline data were preexisting and were not manipulated in any way (Salkind, 2010).

Participants

The participants for this study included sixth- to eighth-grade students enrolled at one middle school within Evergreen Public Schools. This population served as a delimitation because the specific behavior modification strategies of the other four middle schools in the district were uncertain. The strategies the middle school chose to be studied were initiated at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. More specifically, students who received exclusionary school discipline within four consecutive school years (2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018) were selected. These students typically ranged in age from 11 to 14 years old.

The general demographics of the students at the sample middle school are detailed in Table 3.1, as reported by Washington State’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). The demographics have been included to aid in determining the transferability of this study.

Instruments

The discipline data used for this study had already been collected and archived by the Evergreen Public Schools. The specific data needed for this study accounted for a 4-
year span, including 2 school years before discipline reform, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, and 2 school years after reform strategies, 2016-2017 and 2017-2018. The data were used to analyze and identify the degree of change, if any, between the two sets.

The Evergreen Public Schools collected the census data needed for this research study and stored the data in a statewide student information system known to Washington public school employees as Skyward (Version 05.18.06.00.08-11.7). Skyward collects and manages a variety of student data, including student demographics, attendance, grades, discipline, enrollment in special programs, and numerous additional data sources.

When a student is assigned an in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion, the record of this is entered into Skyward by an administrative assistant.

Table 3.1

Participating School Demographic Information per OSPI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Enrollment</td>
<td>1043</td>
<td>1021</td>
<td>1065</td>
<td>1083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>38 (3.6%)</td>
<td>39 (3.8%)</td>
<td>37 (3.5%)</td>
<td>37 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>39 (3.7%)</td>
<td>32 (3.1%)</td>
<td>25 (2.3%)</td>
<td>31 (2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>234 (22.4%)</td>
<td>269 (26.3%)</td>
<td>301 (28.3%)</td>
<td>319 (29.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3 (.3%)</td>
<td>3 (.3%)</td>
<td>7 (.7%)</td>
<td>3 (.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>23 (2.2%)</td>
<td>22 (2.2%)</td>
<td>27 (2.5%)</td>
<td>27 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>57 (5.5%)</td>
<td>57 (5.6%)</td>
<td>73 (6.9%)</td>
<td>82 (7.58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>649 (62.2%)</td>
<td>599 (58.7%)</td>
<td>595 (55.9%)</td>
<td>584 (53.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 504</td>
<td>17 (1.6%)</td>
<td>19 (1.9%)</td>
<td>23 (2.1%)</td>
<td>32 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Meals</td>
<td>684 (65.4%)</td>
<td>644 (63%)</td>
<td>661 (61.4%)</td>
<td>753 (69.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>137 (13.1%)</td>
<td>143 (14%)</td>
<td>165 (15.3%)</td>
<td>187 (17.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>141 (13.5%)</td>
<td>148 (14.5%)</td>
<td>135 (12.5%)</td>
<td>162 (15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to accessing Skyward to obtain student discipline data, a data mining software known as Homeroom (Version 4, School Data Solutions, 2018) was used to mine and disaggregate the data from Skyward. Homeroom is a tool provided to designated Evergreen public school employees for the sole purpose of disaggregating large amounts of student data. The user can select student variables or demographics, and the data that correspond to them, and then generate a report. For this study, the parameters used to mine data from Homeroom included the school years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018. The parameters also included sixth- to eighth-grade students who were enrolled at the school in the study. The report included only discipline that resulted in out-of-school suspensions or expulsions. All reports provided by the Homeroom software were stripped of all identifying information of the participating students (see Appendix B).

**Data Analysis Methods**

The primary method of analyzing the data collected in this research was to use central tendency descriptive statistics to determine significance and to understand if the observed changes, if any, were a result of the targeted intervention or a result of chance. According to Salkind’s (2014) textbook on rudimentary statistics, descriptive statistics are recommended for use when organizing data and describing differences in data sets. Since the focus of this study was to determine if the Student Success Academy could reduce the overrepresentation of students in special education among the population of students who were suspended or expelled from the school, this approach seemed the most appropriate to compare pre- and post-intervention data.
The specific tool used to determine the central tendency of the discipline data in this research was Microsoft Excel (Version 1902). Salkind (2014) stated that SPSS is one of the most popular professional data analysis software packages on the market. However, Microsoft Excel has many of the same functions of SPSS, is just as reliable, and may be more cost effective. As a result, Microsoft Excel was selected for this study because it is a reputable software package, can be used to accurately conduct descriptive statistics, and had been purchased previously (Salkind, 2014).

In addition to using descriptive statistics to analyze changes in discipline data, an effect size measurement was used to determine the meaningful significance of the change. In a seminal book about statistical power analysis of the behavioral sciences, Cohen (1988) argued that effect size provides statistics on the meaningful significance of data and is often more relevant to behavioral sciences than statistical significance. In an article about effect size for comparative studies, Olejnik and Algina (2000) supported Cohen’s assumptions by stating that statistical significance does not infer meaningfulness and that effect size measurements should be the focus of research conclusions. While numerous effect size estimates can be used to determine meaningful significance in change, the model that was selected for this study was Cohen’s $d$, as this estimate has a standardized way of determining degrees of change (Salkind, 2014). According to Steinberg’s (2010) textbook on statistics, Cohen’s $d$ formula is defined as $d = \frac{M_1 - M_2}{SD_{pooled}}$ where $SD_{pooled} = \sqrt{\left(\frac{SD_1^2 + SD_2^2}{2}\right)}$. Steinberg stated that Cohen’s $d$ designates that if the effect size is 0.4 or less, it is a small degree of change; if the effect size is 0.5 to 0.7, then it is medium degree of change; and if the effect size is 0.8 or higher, it is a large degree of change.
To analyze the data collected in this study, a variety of steps were completed. The first step was to obtain permission to collect, analyze, and share school district data. As a result, an organizational informed consent form was sent to the school district’s Chief Academic Accountability Officer. Permission to use and share data was granted (see Appendix A).

The next step was to filter and disaggregate student demographic data as archived by the Skyward database. The purpose of this was to determine the composition of the student groups in relation to the overall school population. The overall population composition data were needed to compare to the composition of the student groups who had been suspended or expelled. The data from the suspended and expelled student groups are referred to as the examined incidents.

Homeroom was used to collect and disaggregate both sets of data and to generate a discipline consequence proportionality report for each of the school years examined (see Appendices B-E). Homeroom was used to calculate these values by dividing the examined incident composition rate by the overall population composition rate. The discipline proportionality composition report contains the overrepresentation or underrepresentation rates of student groups for each of the school years examined in this study and will be articulated further in the next section.

While discipline proportionality data are valuable for determining if a change had occurred as a result of the alternative-to-suspension strategy, data in ratio form can be difficult to analyze for statistical significance. As a result, the number of times an incident resulted in a student in special education being suspended or expelled was retrieved from Homeroom for the school years 2014-2015 through 2017-2018 and broken
down by grade level. The data were then analyzed through central tendency descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel.

The final step of the data analysis procedure was to use effect size statistics to analyze the degree of change between pre- and post-intervention. The effect size statistics helped to determine if a meaningful significance of change was observed between pre- and post-intervention data. Results of the descriptive statistics and effect size tests will be examined further in Chapter 4.

There were a few limitations to this study that were unavoidable. The first limitation of this study was the subjectivity of assigning student discipline by the three school administrators who were involved with student management. Each administrator was in charge of managing the behavioral referrals for a particular grade level. The school district’s policy highly encouraged leaders to use alternatives to suspension. However, what the administrators decided to do was completely at their discretion and varied depending on the nature of the incident. Additionally, one administrator might have found an incident more or less severe than another administrator.

Secondly, in addition to the subjectivity of the leaders who were assigning discipline, another limitation of this study was student mobility. Because of the revolving-door nature of student enrollments and withdrawals, cohorts of students are in a constant state of flux. As a result, student cohorts differ from one school year to the next.

The final limitation two this study is that the Student Success Academy is comprised of several different interventions. The Whytry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and continuation of academics supports are all
interwoven into the Student Success Academy but can be implemented independently. As a result, it will be difficult to pinpoint if a specific intervention will result in changes or to discipline disproportionality or if all interventions are needed.

**Delimitations**

The issue of disparity in disciplinary consequences affects a variety of student groups, most notably African Americans, Hispanics, and students in special education. While all students are entitled to equitable opportunities to learn, the primary focus of this study pertained to students receiving special education services. Not only did this serve to establish a scope for the study, but it was also intended to add new knowledge specific to the field of education, as students in special education typically are omitted from research on discipline disproportionality (Ayon et al., 2014; González, 2015)

The middle school selected for this research proposal was also deliberate. The school district has four other middle schools from which discipline data could be gathered. However, the specifics on how to assign discipline may not be consistent between the four schools. Focusing on one specific middle school helped to ensure that the integrity of the research was maintained.

Finally, the school years selected were strategic. The interventions chosen by the sample middle school were initiated at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. As a result, current post-reform data were collected for the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. Additionally, 2 years of pre-reform data were also collected to compare the rates of change. These included the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years.
Summary

The purpose of this quantitative study was to provide public school leaders with statistics to drive decision making when it comes to selecting interventions aimed at reducing the disproportionality of discipline among students in special education. This study was conducted by analyzing secondary discipline data and then providing statistics on what kind of changes can be expected the first 2 years of a discipline reform policy, based on the requirement of using alternatives to suspension and social-emotional learning. Because pre- and post-discipline reform data were analyzed, this study had a post-hoc quasi-experimental design.

Data were collected from sixth- to eighth-grade students from one specific middle school within Evergreen Public Schools located in southwest Washington. The aggregate data are currently stored in a database that is managed by a system known as Skyward. An application known as Homeroom was used to mine and disaggregate the data from Skyward.

There were several limitations to this study. One of these limitations was the subjectivity or discretion of the three different school leaders when it comes to assigning disciplinary consequences to students. Another limitation of this study was student mobility. Student mobility is the revolving door of enrolling and withdrawing of students who are transferring to different schools due to their families relocating. As a result, cohorts of students are always changing.

Delimitations to this study were put in place to establish boundaries. These delimitations included focusing on discipline data for students in special education, limiting data collection to one middle school, and creating parameters around the school
years used for data mining. These delimitations should help readers in determining if this study may be transferable to their specific locations.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The objective of this study was to determine if an intentional alternative-to-suspension strategy, grounded in WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, could have an impact on the discipline disproportionality rates among middle school students enrolled in special education within a southwest Washington public school district. One goal of this study is to provide educational leaders with data to drive their own decision making when it comes to selecting an alternative-to-suspension intervention and providing equitable discipline for their students as required by the ESSA (2015).

Presentation of Findings

As mentioned previously, Homeroom software was used to disaggregate discipline proportionality data that had been archived in Skyward, Washington State’s student management database. The data collected are from the school years 2014-2018. The composition of students in special education is shown in Table 4.1.

Homeroom was then configured to present the data based on the overrepresentation or underrepresentation, or proportionality, of student groups related to their representation in the examined incidents. This was accomplished in Homeroom by dividing the special education examined incident composition rate by the overall population composition rate. These reports can be seen in Appendices B-E. However, the results of the data were compiled in Table 4.2. Data from nondisabled students were also included for comparison.
Table 4.1

Composition of Students in Special Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall population composition</td>
<td>14.69%</td>
<td>14.94%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
<td>15.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examined incident composition</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>48.45%</td>
<td>37.01%</td>
<td>25.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2

Discipline Proportionality Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>14.69%</td>
<td>14.94%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
<td>15.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education proportionality</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondisabled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examined incidents composition</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>51.55%</td>
<td>62.99%</td>
<td>74.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall population composition</td>
<td>85.31%</td>
<td>85.06%</td>
<td>86.86%</td>
<td>84.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondisabled proportionality</td>
<td>.654</td>
<td>.606</td>
<td>.724</td>
<td>.877</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A proportionality rate of 1.0 signifies to researchers that there is an equal representation of students in special education within the overall population, when comparing to their representation within the suspended and expelled examined incidents. Researchers interpret proportionality numbers higher than 1.0 as an overrepresentation of a group when it comes to suspensions and expulsions, while researchers interpret numbers under 1.0 as an underrepresentation. For example, during the 2014-2015 school year, students in special education composed 14.69% of the overall population, but 44.2% of the examined incidents. Therefore, they were severely overrepresented, with a composition index of 3.01 (44.2% / 14.69%).

At first glance, the special education data in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 could be
interpreted as a reduction in disproportionality rates between pre- and post-intervention, as the pre-intervention rates were 3.01 and 3.24, and post-intervention rates were 2.82 and 1.68. However, further analysis was necessary to interpret this data more concisely. While the goal of this research was to determine if there was a significant difference in the proportionality of discipline that students in special education received, the notion of ratios needed to be put aside temporarily for statistics to be calculated properly. As a result, Table 4.3 documents a breakdown of the ratios from Table 4.2 and emphasizes student numbers. The examined incident composition represents the number of incidents involving students in special education who have been suspended/expelled compared to the total number of suspensions/expulsions issued. The overall population composition represents the number of special education students compared to the total population of students enrolled.

Before beginning the statistical analysis of this data, it is important to note the differences between the proportionalities of students in special education and those without disabilities. As highlighted in Chapter 2, researchers have indicated that across the nation, students in special education are suspended or expelled at rates of 2 to 3 times that of nondisabled students (Losen et al., 2015). Furthermore, Burke and Nishioka (2014) observed in their study that special education students in the neighboring state of Oregon were being suspended 4 times that of nondisabled peers. What the data from this research have revealed is that students in special education at the school included in this Table 4.3

**Discipline Proportionality Breakdown**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examined incidents composition</td>
<td>145/328</td>
<td>110/225</td>
<td>77/208</td>
<td>47/138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall population composition: 166/1130, 168/1124, 150/1152, 173/1134

Special education proportionality: 3.01, 3.24, 2.82, 1.68

Nondisabled proportionality: .654, .606, .724, .877

Examined incidents composition: 183/328, 115/225, 131/208, 91/138

Overall population composition: 964/1130, 956/1124, 1002/1152, 961/1134

Nondisabled proportionality: .654, .606, .724, .877

Study were being suspended at rates of 4.6 to 5.34 times that of their nondisabled peers before the implementation of their alternative-to-suspension strategy (see Table 4.4). However, reductions to these ratios can be seen in post-intervention data as reflected by the 3.89 ratio for the 2016-2017 school year and 1.91 for the 2017-2018 school year.

It is also good to note that while the disproportionality rates of students in special education have decreased, the rates for nondisabled students had increased slightly. For example in 2014-2015 the proportionality rate was .654 but by 2017-2018 the rate had increased slightly to .877. While this is a mild increase and still under 1.0, this group is still underrepresented in the examined incidents. Reasons for this increase are unknow to the researcher. However, it could be the result of the subjectivity of administrators when assigning school discipline consequences as discussed in the limitations section.

To facilitate the central tendancy descriptive statistical analyses, the examined incident data were broken down by grade level within the special education population. Table 4.5 contains the number of discipline outcomes resulting in students in special education being suspended or expelled. These numbers were also organized by the school.

Figure 4.1 contains the data from Table 4.5 in a scatter chart format to provide a visual reference on the suspensions/expulsions. The average number of suspensions between the 4 school years, based on the data in Table 4.5, was 31.58 suspensions per year. The total suspensions/expulsions are also included.
Table 4.4

Comparison of Proportionality Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
<th>Nondisabled</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.654</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.606</td>
<td>5.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>.724</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>.877</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5

Number of Incidents Resulting in Special Education Students Being Suspended/Expelled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>6th Grade</th>
<th>7th Grade</th>
<th>8th Grade</th>
<th>6th-8th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1. Number of incidents resulting in students in special education being suspended/expelled per year by grade level.
The data contained in Table 4.5 and Figure 4.1 may appear to reflect a reduction in discipline, especially when looking at the downward trend of 145 suspensions/expulsions during the 2014-2015 school year and comparing them to the 47 suspensions/expulsions that occurred in 2017-2018. However, additional analysis was necessary to quantify the change. The data from Table 4.5 were analyzed using the descriptive feature within Microsoft Excel (Version 1902). The data were separated into three categories: (a) all years, (b) pre-reform years, and (c) post-reform years. The results of this data can be seen in Table 4.6.

The descriptive statistical analysis between pre- and post-intervention data contained a variety of key findings. The difference in examined incident means between pre- and post-intervention pairs was reduced by 21.83, which reflects 49% fewer suspensions and expulsions. The median examined incidents was reduced from 35.5 to 24, which reflects a reduction of 32%. Finally, the number of examined incidents was reduced by 98 incidents, from 145 in 2014-2015 to 47 in 2017-2018, which is a 67.5% reduction in the number of suspensions and expulsions that students in special education received as a result of the intervention.

To add further value to the results of the descriptive statistics, an additional test of effect size was used to determine if a meaningful significance of change was observed between pre- and post-discipline reform strategies. The specific effect size that was chosen for this study is Cohen’s $d$. The reason that an effect size test was chosen to analyze the data in this study is that in comparative studies, statistical significance does Table 4.6

*Descriptive Statistics*
not necessarily infer meaningfulness when it comes to measuring rates of change, especially within the field of behavioral sciences (Cohen, 2008). For example, when a sample size is large enough, a small rate of change can be deemed as significant. Conversely, effect size calculations can be interpreted independent of the sample’s size and can give a more accurate sense of whether the change is meaningful, even if the sample is smaller (Olejnik & Algina, 2000).

Steinberg (2008) stated Cohen’s $d$ formula as:

$$d = \frac{M_1 - M_2}{s_{\text{pooled}}}$$

where $s_{\text{pooled}} = \sqrt{\left( s_1^2 + s_2^2 \right) / 2}$

Cohen’s standard indicates that if the effect size is 0.2 or less, it is a small change; if the effect size is 0.3 to 0.5, then it is medium; and if the effect size is 0.6 or greater, it is
a large degree of change (Steinberg, 2008). The data from table 4.5 were analyzed using Cohen’s $d$ and can be seen in Table 4.7.

According to the result of the discipline proportionality analysis, as reflected in Table 4.7, it was determined that a medium to large effect size change was observed between all pairs. As detailed in Table 4.8, if the effect size is 0.5 to 0.7, then it reflects a medium degree of change, and if the effect size is .8 or higher, it reflects a large degree of change. In this research, the largest degree of change, 1.399, was observed within Pair 3, which compared the first pre-intervention year, 2014-2015, to the last post-intervention year of 2017-2018. The smallest degree of change within a pair was 0.44, which was observed between the pre-intervention years of 2014-2015 and 2015-2016.

Salkind (2014) stated that statistical significance should not be interpreted without considering the context of the study, which is why multiple statistical formulas were applied to the data. After completing both descriptive statistics and effect size analyses, enough evidence exists to answer the research questions of this research study. The conclusions of the research question testing are contained in Table 4.9.

Table 4.7

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>Cohen’s $d$</td>
<td>Cohen’s Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>14/15</td>
<td>48.00</td>
<td>30.19</td>
<td>.4472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15/16</td>
<td>36.66</td>
<td>19.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>14/15</td>
<td>48.00</td>
<td>30.19</td>
<td>1.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>25.66</td>
<td>3.055</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>14/15</td>
<td>48.00</td>
<td>30.19</td>
<td>1.399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17/18</td>
<td>15.66</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine if a reduction in the rates of discipline disproportionality among students in special education was observable within the first 2 years of an intentional discipline reform strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, a restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports. This study was conducted by taking a census of student discipline data for 2 school years before implementation (2014-2015, 2015-2016) and then comparing it to data from 2 years after the implementation (2016-2017, 2017-2018). The goal of this study was to analyze what size of change, if any, was observed as a result of the alternative strategy.

Table 4.8

The Interpretation of Cohen’s d

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohen’s Standard</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
<th>Percentile Standing</th>
<th>Percent of Nonoverlap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>81.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>79.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>77.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>75.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>73.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>70.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>68.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
<td>65.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
<td>62.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
<td>55.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Large 0.8 79 47.4%
Once the data had been collected and analyzed, it was evident that a reduction in disproportionality rates had been observed among students in special education. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The examined incidents mean was reduced from 42.5 incidents to 20.67. The examined incidents median went from 35.5 incidents to 24. The overall number of incidents was reduced from 255 incidents to 124.

The data were further analyzed using Cohen’s $d$ effect size formula to determine the meaningful significance of the changes. According to Cohen’s $d$, if the effect size is 0.4 or less, it is a small degree of change; if the effect size is 0.5 to 0.7, then it is a

Table 4.9

Research Question Test Conclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ_1</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, increase or decrease discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?</td>
<td>For students in special education, there was a decrease of 98 incidents (67.5%), that resulted in a suspension or expulsion between the first pre-intervention year, 2014-2015 and the last post-intervention year, 2017-2018. There was a mean decrease of 49% for incidents that resulted in a suspension or expulsion between pre- and post-intervention year sets. Disproportionality rates decreased from 3.01 to 1.68 between 2014-2015 and 2017-2018. During the 2015-2016 school year, students in special education were suspended or expelled at the rate of 5.34 times that of their...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
nondisabled peers. However, by 2017-2018 these rates were reduced to 1.91 times.

RQ2: Will implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, result in a meaningful change in discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

Results from the Cohen’s $d$ analysis consistently reflected medium to large effect size changes indicating that a meaningful change had occurred between all year pairs examined.

medium degree of change; and if the effect size is .8 or higher, it is a large degree of change (Steinberg, 2008). In this study, all data pairs had a medium to large effect size change. As this study resided within the field of behavioral sciences and was designed to provide school leaders with data to drive their decision making, a higher emphasis was placed on the meaningful significance of the changes as compared to the statistical significance (Cohen, 1988).

Chapter 5 includes further discussion and conclusions of the findings illuminated in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 sections include: (a) Discussion of the Findings and Conclusions, (b) Application of Findings and Conclusions to the Problem Statement, (c) Application to Leadership, (d) Recommendations for Action, (e) Recommendations for Further Research, and (g) Concluding Statement.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Students enrolled in public school special education programs continue to struggle for equity when it comes to learning opportunities, despite federal protections established to ensure they receive them. Concerns about equity are especially true when it comes to the way school leaders manage student discipline. However, new policies, such as the ESSA (2015), are forcing the prioritization of this issue within school districts. To date, few researchers have focused studies specifically on students in special education, even though they are often suspended or expelled at higher rates than any other student groups (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). This study was designed to provide public school leaders with an example of one middle school’s intentional alternative-to-suspension strategy and to provide an analysis of data documenting changes in the proportionality of discipline that was reported as a result of implementation.

The purpose of this quantitative quasi-experimental study was to examine if a discipline reform strategy based on the use of the restorative practices philosophy, WhyTry curriculum, community service, and the continuation of academic supports could reduce the rates of disproportionality among students in special education. The expectation of this study is that it may serve to provide school leaders with data to drive their decision making when it comes to addressing issues of inequality, especially when it comes to altering the disciplinary practices in their buildings. Previous research on this subject has been limited to thoughts mentioned in the future studies section of papers (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). As a result, one of the driving factors behind this study was to emphasize the importance of this topic and to bring research specific to this issue into the mainstream.
Chapter 1 included details on the problem of overrepresentation in disciplinary rates among students in special education and the pressures now being placed upon school leaders to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. This chapter also contained insight into what the challenges have been over the past 50 years for both students in special education and school leaders, including the rationale for finding alternative-to-suspension programs that are based on research. Chapter 1 included details one middle school’s intentional alternative-to-suspension strategy designed to reduce discipline disproportionality rates among student groups. As a result, the following research questions were created and tested in this study:

- **RQ1**: Does implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, increase or decrease discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

- **RQ2**: Will implementing an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports, result in a meaningful change in discipline disproportionality rates among students in special education within the first 2 years of implementation?

Chapter 2 included further exploration into the historical context of the problem and highlighted several federal policies that were created with the intent of ensuring these students receive a FAPE. This chapter contained details on the challenges that leaders across the globe have faced while pursuing equitable opportunities for their stakeholders.
Additionally, this section contained the struggles faced by students with learning disabilities and included the findings that minimal research has been conducted on programs aimed at keeping these students in school. Finally, Chapter 2 contained a variety of strategies that have been used as interventions aimed at reducing rates in the United States and included articulation on gaps in the research that led to contributing further research on this topic.

Chapter 3 contained details on the research methodology and design chosen for the study. Evidence for why the method and designs were chosen, compared to other methods, were also provided in Chapter 3. Additionally, Chapter 3 contained the demographics of students from which the census data on discipline disproportionality rates were collected. Finally, Chapter 3 included the instruments used in the data collection and analysis process and what statistical measurements were used to establish the validity of the research questions.

Chapter 4 included the analysis of data and details on the findings of the study. This section also contained details on discipline disproportionality data spanning 4 years, which included data reflecting 2 years of pre-intervention and 2 years post-intervention, and an effect size analysis of the data to determine if a meaningful significance of change was observed as a result of the alternative-to-suspension strategy. Finally, the research questions were reevaluated to determine if they could be retained or rejected based on the analysis of the data collected.

Chapter 5 contains a summary of the main components of the research. The findings and conclusions are also included in this chapter. Finally, Chapter 5 contains the following sections: (a) Discussion of Findings and Conclusions, (b) Application of
Findings and Conclusions to the Problem Statement, (c) Application to Leadership, (d) Recommendations for Action, (e) Recommendations for Further Research, and (g) Concluding Statement.

**Discussion of Findings and Conclusions**

Four years’ worth of discipline data, spanning the school years of 2014-2018, were gathered to document the rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions among middle school students receiving special education services who were enrolled in one southwest Washington school. Two of these years reflected pre-alternative-to-suspension implementation data, and the other two reflected post-implementation data. Initial discipline proportionality data, disaggregated by the Homeroom software, have revealed that a reduction of discipline disproportionality among students in special education was present when it comes to changes that have been documented between the 2-year pre-intervention and the 2-year post-intervention. To analyze changes, the data were analyzed through descriptive statistics. The examined incidents means were reduced by 49%, while the actual number of incidents resulting in a student in special education being suspended was reduced by 67.5%. As a result, RQ1 would support that change was evident and that it was a decrease in suspensions and expulsions.

To determine if the amount of change was meaningful, the data were analyzed using Cohen’s $d$ effect size test. The results of this test and answer to RQ2 were that a medium to large effect sizes between all pairs. What this means, especially for school leaders, is that enough change was observed between each of the examined years’ discipline data to warrant this an effective intervention among the current demographics of students at the school.
Application of Findings and Conclusions to the Problem Statement

In previous research on exclusionary discipline rates, researchers have revealed that, across the nation, students in special education are typically suspended at rates of 2 to 3 times that of their peers (Whitford et al., 2016). According to the data collected in this study, rates were observed with a high mean rate of 5.34 during the 2015-2016 school year. A mean rate of 4.97 was observed for the 2 school years pre-intervention.

The findings shared in this study support that discipline disproportionality rates among middle school students in special education can be changed by a medium to large effect size within the first 2 years of implementation when an alternative-to-suspension program based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, a restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports is implemented. What this ultimately means is that the likelihood of students receiving a FAPE, as required by the IDEA, is more likely to be protected when an alternative-to-suspension strategy, like the one detailed in this study, is implemented.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the most recent and relevant studies on reducing exclusionary discipline consequences among student groups have come out of the Denver Public Schools. However, there are several notable differences between the results of this study and studies like those by Anyon et al. (2014) and González (2015). Most notably, the studies in Denver did not contain any data on students in special education. According to Anyon et al., data on students in special education were omitted because their review of previous research showed that being in special education was not an increased predictor of disciplinary consequences. As mentioned earlier, the research conducted in this study contradicts that notion. Students in special education at the
middle school studied were 5.34 times more likely to be suspended then nondisabled students.

Another key difference between the studies in Denver and this one is how long it took to observe the change. According to Anyon et al. (2014), there were no noticeable changes until 3 years into implementation. This may be because the study did not include pre-intervention data. Instead, they compared one post-intervention year to the next. In an article about implementing PBIS, Sugai, Simonsen, Freeman, and La Salle (2016) stated that it typically takes 3 to 5 years to implement an intervention with fidelity. This may also explain why the immediate change was not seen in Denver. However, this study produced a large effect size change for both initial years of implementation and reduced the incidents resulting in students in special education being suspended or expelled by 67.5% in Year 2.

The study conducted by González (2015), which furthered the work of Anyon et al., included 2 years of pre-intervention data and 1 additional year of post-intervention data. González observed a similar reduction of approximately 50% in suspensions among African American, Latino, and White student groups. However, it took 5 years of implementation to achieve this rate. González also chose not to omit data on students in special education, but did not cite the reasons.

**Application to Leadership**

Providing equitable opportunities for student learning is not only a paramount duty for leaders in the field of public education but is now required by federal mandates like the IDEA and ESSA (Datnow et al., 2017). This is especially true when it comes to managing issues of equity for students in special education. This study was designed to
provide public school leaders with data to drive their decision making on determining an alternative-to-suspension strategy that could reduce the overrepresentation of special education students when it comes to suspensions and expulsions. According to the findings of this study, alternative-to-suspension strategies that incorporate the use of the WhyTry curriculum, a restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports had a medium to large effect size when it comes to the degree of change that school leaders may see within the first 2 years of implementation within a middle school of similar demographics.

Before this study, many public school leaders were engaging in an implement-and-hope philosophy when it came to alternative-to-suspension strategies, due to the lack of empirical research on the topic (Gregory et al., 2017). To compound this issue, studies aimed specifically at reducing discipline disproportionality among students in special education were almost nonexistent (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). However, one objective of this study was to generate new data on this topic and to help bridge gaps in the research.

It is also of interest to note one leadership-related variable that existed in this study and the studies within the Denver Public Schools. This was the presence of system-wide policy change. Both school districts had revised policy at the district level to include language requiring the use of alternatives to suspensions before the implementation of their strategies. Additionally, both of these studies showed a significant decrease in suspensions among student groups. It could be assumed that when district leadership places a high value on policy, there is greater buy-in at the building level compared to grassroots efforts. To further that notion, as of 2016, the ESSA (2015) now requires that
schools adopt a similar policy when it comes to using alternatives to suspension. As a result, it should be easier for school leaders to solicit the needed buy-in at both the district and building levels than it may have been in the past.

**Recommendations for Action**

Public school leaders face a variety of barriers when it comes to ensuring that students have equitable opportunities to learn. This is especially true when it comes to how school leaders respond to violations of school rules. The following section contains recommendations that public school leaders could use to identify issues of inequality and aid in correcting them. One of the goals of this research is to provide school leaders with some alternative-to-suspension tools that could be used to manage student behavior and to ensure that all students receive a free and appropriate public education.

**Review the Data to Identify Potential Issues of Inequity**

The first step in reducing issues of inequity among students in public school settings is to review data and identify where discrepancies may exist. Whether the data be disciplinary, academic, or even attendance, data need to be collected and scrutinized, not only to determine what could be going wrong, but also where successes lie. However, this is just the primary step. Once potential issues have been identified and an intervention has been implemented to rectify the situation, frequent evaluations of data need to be conducted to assess if change is happening. By reviewing the data several times during the school year, leaders can fine-tune how their implementation is proceeding and adjust as needed.
Share Data With the Staff and Explain the Why

One key element in reducing suspensions, expulsions, and disproportionality rates is sharing discipline data with the school staff. Many staff members may not believe there is an overrepresentation of a particular student group until they are presented with the statistics. Sharing data, like the discipline proportionality report, may open staff members’ eyes to the issue and encourage them to rethink the way they manage students in their classrooms and what behavioral issues they refer to administrators.

In addition to illuminating the fact that there is an issue when it comes to student discipline and the overrepresentation of certain groups, sharing the disproportionality data opens up conversations with staff. According to a study about using data to guide difficult conversations about racism, Meyers and Finnigan (2018) stated that sharing discipline disproportionality data with staff resulted in an open and productive conversation about the reasons why disproportionality was present in school discipline practices and led to a brainstorming session on potential solutions to the problem. Practices like this could then be used to establish a team of staff members who are willing to collaborate with school leaders in finding a solution to the inequity.

Data-Driven Decision Making

With public schools funded primarily by taxpayers, it is essential that schools use stakeholder funds effective and efficiently. Throwing an intervention at a problem without researching its proven success with similar demographics is no longer a viable option for schools. The IDEA requires that all interventions designed for students in special education be research based (IDEA, 2004). Furthermore, the ESSA (2015) includes language advocating for school leaders to root decision making in data. Learning
about an intervention at a conference or from another school is not sufficient evidence that an intervention will be a success. While this may spark initial curiosity, school leaders need to dig deeper and find studies from schools with similar demographics before they commit to implementation (Gregory et al., 2017). What works with one demographic or in one region may not be transferable to another. If school leaders set up a team of staff who are dedicated to solving the issues of inequity, as mentioned earlier, the leaders could delegate some of the research to the staff.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of this study support that a reduction in discipline disproportionality rates can be seen among middle school special education students when an alternative-to-suspension strategy based on the use of the WhyTry curriculum, a restorative practices philosophy, community service, and the continuation of academic supports are implemented. However, there may be other areas of focus that were not directly addressed by this research. The following section will detail a few recommendations that may be used to contribute further knowledge to the topic of an alternative-to-suspension program and the impact on students in special education.

It may be of value to determine if these changes would have been as noticeable if the district had not changed policy requiring the use of an alternative-to-suspension strategy. While the school district presented in this study has changed policy to reflect the need to keep students in school, the neighboring school districts have not. However, many of the schools in the neighboring districts have begun to implement their own alternative-to-suspension strategies. It may be beneficial to know the degree of change that is seen from grassroots efforts, as opposed to a systemwide, top-down change.
Another potential area for future studies would encompass the academic improvements of students who participate in an alternative-to-suspension program. As the name suggests, the primary focus of alternative-to-suspension programs is to reduce suspension and expulsion rates as a means of keeping students in their natural learning environment. However, it may be beneficial to analyze if student grades in coursework and standardized testing are impacted by inclusive practices. As in the case of this study, equitable opportunities for student learning were a paramount factor in seeking an alternative-to-suspension program. Therefore, determining if an increase in learning is noticed as a result of the school’s effort would be beneficial.

It would be of value to determine if an alternative-to-suspension program, such as the one detailed in this study, would continue to have a medium to large effect size change among students in special education if one or more of the main components was removed or altered. For example, in an article about the constitutionality of public school community service, Smolla (2000) articulated that forced community service may be considered an inappropriate use of child labor and may not be a legitimate option in some states. Therefore, it may be of value to determine if a similar alternative-to-suspension strategy produces similar results if the community service element is omitted.

Besides staffing the Student Success Academy, the only other component that requires a financial commitment is the WhyTry Curriculum. Basic staff training and access to materials for 1 year costs approximately $600.00 per person with an annual renewal fee of $100.00, according to the current rates at www.whytry.com. It may be beneficial to conduct a similar survey omitting the WhyTry curriculum from the intervention to see what size of change might be observed. If similar results can be
achieved with social-emotional learning curriculum that the district may already have on hand, then the additional expense may not be necessary.

**Concluding Statement**

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision resulted in policy changes that emphasized that equitable learning opportunities should be available to all students despite their race, gender, or challenges to learning. However, over half a century later, there are still students facing barriers to academic success. Despite federal policies put in place to ensure all students receive a free and appropriate public education, school leaders have a pivotal role in ensuring that issues of inequity are not plaguing their buildings.

With the knowledge that providing equity within the public school setting has been a daunting challenge for school leaders across the globe, it is imperative that school leaders be proactive in their efforts to locate and address potential issues (Ward et al., 2015). Reviewing student data regularly will help to illuminate areas of deficit and provide school leaders with the opportunity to create programs to overcome barriers to student success (Datnow et al., 2017). Conducting research to find evidence-based strategies to implement should be emphasized to maximize effectiveness, efficiency, and to prevent falling into implement-and-hope practices (Gregory et al., 2017).

As emphasized earlier in this study, just because federal protections are in place to protect a student group from issues of inequity does not mean that these students are immune from exposure. In the past, provisions like the IDEA created a false sense of security for school leaders when it came to meeting the needs of students in special education. Monitoring the success of all students, regardless of the programs or services they may be receiving, is going to be in the best interest of all stakeholders.
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doi:10.1177/0267659114559116


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APPENDIX A

Organizational Informed Consent Form

CityUniversity
of SEATTLE

Organizational Informed Consent Form

Name of Organization: Evergreen Public Schools
Address: 18501 NE 28th St
City, State, Zip: Vancouver, WA
Telephone: 360-604-4000

By signing this consent form, I understand that Alden Clark (the researcher) is a candidate for an advanced degree, or a faculty member of City University of Seattle. I understand that the researcher is conducting a study about reducing discipline disproportionality. The purpose of this research is to determine how much change can be seen in the first years of a system-wide discipline policy reform initiative.

I understand the findings of this research study are solely the responsibility of the researcher. It is understood that any and all information/data the researcher collects from contacts within and/or about our organization outside the research protocol will not be part of the research findings. I understand the researcher may publish findings following completion of this study. Any information published will be limited to the findings of the research. No research participants will participate in this study without organization and City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board (IRB) knowledge and approval.

☐ I grant the researcher permission to access and use data pertaining to discipline data as needed to conduct the research.
☐ I grant the researcher permission to use organizational premises as necessary to conduct the research.
☐ I grant the researcher permission to collect, use, and store documentation related to the project under study. I understand that in granting permission to access program documentation, the researcher may store copies in a secure manner outside of the organization.
☐ The researcher will maintain all documentation and findings regarding this organization in confidence and confine its use to this research study.
☐ On behalf of the organization, I request a final copy of this research report.

Organization Representative and signature: 
Date: 3/28/15

Print Name and Title: Chief Academic Accountability Officer
Organization: Evergreen Public Schools

Name of Research Supervisor or Advisor: 
Contact Information: 

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX C

2015-2016 Homeroom Discipline Consequence Proportionality Report
# Discipline Consequence Proportionality Report

## Overall Population
- Year: 2015/16
- School(s): Covington Middle School
- Grade(s): 8th Grade, 7th Grade, and 6th Grade
- Students: 1124 Students

## Examined Sub Population
- Students: Students with the following discipline incident consequences: Expulsion or Out of School Suspension
- 101/1124 = 8.98%

## Examined Incidents
- Incidents: Number of discipline incidents resulting in Expulsion or Out of School Suspension
- 227 Incidents

## Student Sub Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Proportions</th>
<th>Student Comp Index</th>
<th>Incident Comp Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.73%</td>
<td>0.99%</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>10.89%</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>27.31%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Native Alaskan</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
<td>0.99%</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>5.16%</td>
<td>8.81%</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2.31%</td>
<td>1.98%</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>57.51%</td>
<td>56.43%</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>Mild</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Proportions</th>
<th>Student Comp Index</th>
<th>Incident Comp Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>504</td>
<td>2.22%</td>
<td>3.86%</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>68.85%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>5.07%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>14.94%</td>
<td>36.63%</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Composition Index Key:**
- **Severe** = 0 - 0.4 and 2 - 3
- **Significant** = 0.4001 - 0.9 and 1.1001 - 1.9999
- **Mild** = 0.9001 - 0.9999 and 1.0001 - 1.1
- **Perfect** = 1
APPENDIX D

2016-2017 Homeroom Discipline Consequence Proportionality Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Population</th>
<th>Examined Sub Population</th>
<th>Examined Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year: 2016/17</td>
<td>Students: Students with the following discipline incident consequences: Expulsion or Out of School Suspension</td>
<td>Incidents: Number of discipline incidents resulting in Expulsion or Out of School Suspension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School(s): Covington Middle School</td>
<td>110/1156 = 9.51%</td>
<td>208 Incidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade(s): 8th Grade, 7th Grade, and 6th Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Sub Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNICITY / RACE</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Proportions</th>
<th>Student Comp Index</th>
<th>Incident Comp Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>3.63%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>0.96 Mild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>2.85%</td>
<td>7.27%</td>
<td>7.21%</td>
<td>2.55 Severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>0.64 Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Native Alaskan</td>
<td>0.69%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0 Severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>6.83%</td>
<td>5.45%</td>
<td>2.89%</td>
<td>0.8 Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2.85%</td>
<td>4.54%</td>
<td>3.36%</td>
<td>1.59 Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>54.75%</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>66.82%</td>
<td>1.11 Significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PROGRAM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Proportions</th>
<th>Student Comp Index</th>
<th>Incident Comp Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>504</td>
<td>2.18%</td>
<td>3.63%</td>
<td>8.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>68.59%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>85.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>8.18%</td>
<td>7.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
<td>28.18%</td>
<td>37.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Composition Index Key:

- **Severe = 0 - 0.4 and 2 - 3**
- **Significant = 0.4001 - 0.9 and 1.1001 - 1.9999**
- **Mild = 0.9991 - 0.9999 and 1.0001 - 1.1**
- **Perfect = 1**

APPENDIX E

2017-2018 Homeroom Discipline Consequence Proportionality Report
## Discipline Consequence Proportionality Report

**Overall Population**
- Year: 2017/18
- School(s): Covington Middle School
- Grade(s): 8th Grade, 7th Grade, and 6th Grade
- 1139 Students

**Examined Sub Population**
- Students: Students with the following discipline incident consequences: Expulsion or Out of School Suspension
- Number of students examined: 116
- Number of students examined: 1139
- Student Comp Index: 10.18%

**Examined Incidents**
- Incidents: Number of discipline incidents resulting in Expulsion or Out of School Suspension
- Number of incidents: 183

### Student Sub Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Proportions</th>
<th>Student Comp Index</th>
<th>Incident Comp Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.24%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>1.09%</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>4.31%</td>
<td>4.37%</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>29.52%</td>
<td>31.03%</td>
<td>28.41%</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Native Alaskan</td>
<td>0.52%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>7.55%</td>
<td>6.89%</td>
<td>6.01%</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2.37%</td>
<td>3.44%</td>
<td>2.18%</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
<td>52.58%</td>
<td>57.37%</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Proportions</th>
<th>Student Comp Index</th>
<th>Incident Comp Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>504</td>
<td>2.89%</td>
<td>3.44%</td>
<td>2.73%</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>70.67%</td>
<td>79.31%</td>
<td>81.42%</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>5.09%</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
<td>10.38%</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>15.27%</td>
<td>25.86%</td>
<td>25.68%</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Composition Index Key:**
- Severe = 0 - 0.4 and 2 - 3
- Significant = 0.4001 - 0.9 and 1.1001 - 1.9999
- Mild = 0.9001 - 0.9999 and 1.0001 - 1.1
- Perfect = 1