

ABSTRACT

HINTON, CANDICE LEE. *Disciplining Students or Creating Prisoners: An Exploratory Collective Case Study of the Impact of Zero-Tolerance Policies on the School-to-Prison Pipeline from the Perspective of High School Principals in Rural North Carolina.* (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

This study aimed to learn about the impact of zero-tolerance discipline policies on the school-to-prison pipeline through the experiences of rural high school principals tasked with implementing this specific protocol. This research used a qualitative collective case study design which included interviews with eight teachers in from different rural high schools in North Carolina. Analysis of achievement and discipline data from each principal's district was also included and discussed.

Participants in this study felt that principals recognize that minority students and students with disabilities are affected more frequently, however, the implementation is district directed and must continue. The study also found that the use of zero-tolerance policy discipline could potentially strain the relationships between students and faculty. Rather than examining the underlying issues that contribute to student misbehavior, this study shows that zero-tolerance policy discipline intensifies the rate at which students become criminalized which escalates the likelihood of the student to become criminal justice involved. Principals also reported that the School Resource Officers significantly contribute to the climate of the school while also maintaining the safety and security on campus.

All students, regardless of race or disability, should be afforded equitable educational opportunities. Failure to meet the educational needs of students increases because of the use of zero-tolerance policies when disciplining students. Principals revealed that they understand the implications of using zero-tolerance policies, but they are instructed to use them regardless of circumstance. The use of zero-tolerance policies and the complications involved were described

during the interview process. Implementing zero-tolerance policies has been shown to push students out of school and into the criminal justice system while decreasing their ability to live a successful life and be productive in society.

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Disciplining Students or Creating Prisoners: An Exploratory Collective Case Study of the Impact of Zero-Tolerance Policies on the School-to-Prison Pipeline from the Perspective of High School Principals in Rural North Carolina

by
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DEDICATION

To my son, Jonathan. Everything that I do in this life is for you. The way you face life head on with the biggest heart for everyone truly amazes me. I am so proud of the young man you are becoming. You have such a unique and wonderful side of you that makes the world a better place simply because you are in it. You are the reason I work so hard to be my best. Thank you for your love and patience while I completed my degree. You bring support and joy to my life that no one else ever could. Your smile lights up any room, your laughter is contagious, and you are the sweetest blessing I have ever known. This work is a testament to the strength and love you inspire in me every day. You are my greatest motivation and my most cherished accomplishment. Never forget how much I love you and how truly extraordinary you are. You are, and always will be, my greatest gift.

BIOGRAPHY

Candice Lee Hinton was born in Raleigh, NC in October 1979. She grew up in Franklin County, NC. Candice attended North Carolina State University, earning her Bachelor of Science degree in Criminology. After earning this degree, Candice worked for the NCSBI and Wake County CCBI before being hired as a teacher in Franklin County. Candice worked as a teacher for 10 years. In 2016, Candice returned to North Carolina State University in 2016, earning a Master of School Administration degree while being a member of the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA). NELA is a fully funded scholarship program ranked one of the Top Principal Preparatory Program in the United States, one of only five to earn this distinction from the University Council of Education Administration. After earning this degree, Candice served as an assistant principal for approximately five years. During this time, she was a 2019 recipient of NC State University's U.S. Department of Education grant titled "The Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) 2.0: Developing and Sustaining Effective Leaders for High-Need Rural Districts," for her school. She was also a presenter and guest panelist at North Carolina State University's 2019 NELA Summer Conference: Building Teacher Efficacy: The Key to School Improvement.

In 2021, Candice returned to North Carolina State University for a final time to earn her Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. She also accepted a principal position in 2022 with the North Carolina Department of Adult Instruction. In this position, she leads an academic school inside of a correctional institution that provides a high school education to 18–22-year-old men to meet Title I and Exceptional Children federal and state requirements. She values the opportunity that she has with her staff to provide an education to students that most in society have already given up on.

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To my mama and daddy, words can never express the love I have for you. Thank you for always being there to love me through everything and remind me how strong I am. I am so thankful that God made me your little girl.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During the 2018 - 2019 school year, nearly three million students in the United States were subject to out-of-school suspensions at least once. From these suspensions, over 11 million days of academic instruction were missed (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). National suspension rates are startling, as are increases in student failure rates which escalate the likelihood of school dropout (Skiba, 2014). Strict zero-tolerance policies adopted by many school systems require suspension for small occurrences of misbehavior. Zero-tolerance policies decrease the ability of many students to be successful in their educational and career journeys as they work to graduate, continue their education, or begin their careers.

Education and schooling are thought of as the “great equalizer” (Sandovnik, et.al., 2013), however, some schools within the U.S. system of education can be viewed as criminalizing institutions for certain categories of students (Garcia, et. al., 2022). Woods (2021) explains “Research suggests the upsurge of in-school arrests is the direct result of the growth of police presence on school campuses and has given rise to an increase in student contact with the criminal justice system, thus creating the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon” (p.19). The automatic exclusion of students caused by zero-tolerance policies fosters poor relationships between students and educators while ushering a growing line of at-risk students into the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett, 2017). In many collective cases, the exclusionary practices, as Novak (2019) explained, have intensified structural racism and increased staff-to-student biases with disregard for the impact on students, especially students of color. For many students, punitive discipline measures promoted through zero-tolerance policies cause weak relationships and bonds within their school and community (Rainey, 2020). Furthermore, zero-tolerance policies

often exclude at-risk students leading to a loss of valuable instruction time and academic growth which diminishes their opportunities for educational success.

Zero-tolerance policies align with the belief of deterrence through exclusion. The consequences for students who violate rules are believed to deter students from committing undesirable and disruptive behaviors (Rausch, et al., 2014). The disproportionality of suspension and expulsion is immense when comparing data between minority and White students. The data also shows the significant discrepancies with the use of zero-tolerance policies regarding students with disabilities. Although discipline in school must be established to ensure order and accountability for safety purposes, zero-tolerance policies are associated with contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Research Problem Statement

Twenty-five percent of the world's prison population is accounted for in the United States, however, only five percent of the world population is in the United States (Obama, 2015). To tackle this problem so that we can live in a country where this statistic is no longer true, we must understand how offenders have managed to enter the criminal justice system. One avenue by which students enter the system is by way of the proverbial school-to-prison pipeline. Raufu (2017) explains, "The school-to-prison pipeline is an issue that can significantly transform a student's opportunities when it comes to education. It disproportionately affects students of color and students with disabilities and pushes them out of the school system and into the prison system at alarming rates" (p. 48).

The discipline policies and practices in schools have been a concern for the American public for nearly forty years (Brown-Kersey, 2011). Although many researchers have found that long-term suspensions and exclusionary practices are unsuccessful, many districts and states

continue to employ zero-tolerance practices (Bogale, 2016; Smith, 2015; Woods, 2021). Zero-tolerance policy discipline allows school leaders to feel that they are making their campuses and districts safe through the removal of criminal behavior on campus. Due to the fated impact of suspensions and expulsions related to zero-tolerance policy discipline, students are removed from classrooms and schools and introduced to juvenile justice and criminal justice systems. As the ACLU (2003) stated, “Zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in schools lead to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school. Students of color are especially vulnerable to push-out trends and the discriminatory application of discipline” (para. 2).

School Resource Officers are stationed in many schools across the country to ensure the safety and security of students and staff during the school day and at extracurricular events. However, their presence and function in schools is controversial. Sneed (2015) explains that over the past three decades, School Resource Officers have been used in schools as the use of zero-tolerance policies expanded, which caused minor classroom behaviors to be approached as harsh discipline policy infractions. The use of School Resource Officers combined with a lack of educational setting training and the introduction of zero-tolerance policies has caused an escalation in juvenile justice referrals. (Sneed, 2015). Moody (2016) discussed that children, even at the age of five, who have minor infractions are handed over to police officers just based on their availability in the school.

The employment of zero-tolerance policies combined with the use of School Resource Officers to enforce those policies, creates an environment that encourages the school-to-prison pipeline. The purpose of school is to prepare students for adulthood and society, not to encourage participation in the criminal justice system. According to Heitzeg (2009), disciplinary action

from zero-tolerance policy discipline can have lifelong consequences that exceed the duration of suspension and expulsion. The impact of school policies, especially those related to discipline, must be evaluated for their impact on the future of students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study is to explore the impact of zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools and the impact on the school-to-prison pipeline through the perspective of rural high school principals charged with using this specific discipline protocol. “The term zero-tolerance policies refer to individual school or district-wide policies that mandate predetermined typically harsh punishments, such as suspension and expulsion for a wide degree of rule violations” (Smith, 2015, p. 125). Zero-tolerance policies have been broadened from weapon and drug possession to include the completion of homework as well as conduct outside of the school (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Zero-tolerance policies do not allow the use of discretion in the handling of particular school rule violations regardless of student age or circumstance. “The single greatest predictor of involvement in the juvenile justice system is a history of disciplinary referrals at school” (Fowler, 2011, p.14). Without discretion, these policies can perpetuate inequalities and contribute to students being pushed out of the educational system and into the criminal justice system. This study seeks to better understand the perspectives and experiences of rural high school administrators when implementing zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural North Carolina.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated in this qualitative collective case study are:

1. How do rural high school principals feel about zero-tolerance policies?

2. What are the experiences of rural high school principals when applying zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural school districts?
 - a. How do rural principals feel about the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline in rural schools?
3. How do exclusionary discipline policies and practices such as suspension and expulsion contribute to achievement gaps and racial disparities in school discipline?

These questions will examine whether these policies help deter student behaviors and enable students to be academically successful or whether the policies create lifelong criminals when the student is introduced to the criminal justice system.

Statement of Significance

Understanding principal perceptions regarding zero-tolerance policies and their impact on the school-to-prison pipeline is imperative in today's society to determine the value of zero-tolerance policies and the effect of discipline on the lives of students. In this study, the zero-tolerance policies will be investigated as well as possible disparities among the administration of such policies upon the affected students. The research data from this collective case study can be used to determine whether zero-tolerance policy discipline reduces undesirable behavior among students or pushes them toward a deviant lifestyle. "The zero-tolerance policies that today are the most extreme form of the punishment paradigm were originally written for the war on drugs in the early 1980s, and later applied to schools" (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 810). The branding of students as criminals has resulted in achievement gaps that often funnel students into the criminal justice system and lower the possibility of them living fulfilling and productive lives.

This research is timely and should be used to partner with stakeholders to create the most effective discipline strategies for all students regarding circumstances, reasons for behavior (such

as self-defense), or student discipline history (Smith, 2015). The collective case study investigation is significant as it provides the perspective of a principal's lived experiences while using zero-tolerance policies in the rural context. Their unique insights are highlighted and have not been greatly analyzed in past research. The results of this research must also be used to "take into account the disparity in school discipline as a risk factor for the gap in the academic achievement between white and African American students" (Raufu, 2017, p. 47).

Overview of Study

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study is to examine the experiences and perspectives of rural high school principals based on disciplining with zero-tolerance policies. This study will further investigate the impact of enforced zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline. Moreover, this study will also explore zero-tolerance policy discipline's impact on achievement gaps and racial disparities.

This collective case study will explore the experiences of eight rural high school principals in North Carolina. As Creswell (2007) explains, "A collective case study is best used when the research is descriptive or exploratory in nature and is a process by which detailed consideration is given to the development of a particular person, group, situation, or phenomenon over time" (p.38). Given the unique nature of each participant's background and career, this method of study will prove best to provide greater details and specific examples.

Data will be collected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used to select participants who can provide rich and relevant information based on specific criteria that align with the research objectives (Aspers & Corte, 2019). For this research study, rural high school principals in North Carolina who discipline using zero-tolerance policies will be interviewed. I will meet with each participant one-on-one in their preferred location. I will use 15 interview

questions in a semi-structured open-ended interview format. Each interview will require approximately an hour. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Data will be gathered and analyzed through coding to find common themes in the interview answers of the participants as well as more understanding of the impact that zero-tolerance policy discipline has on the students.

Statement of Positionality

I am the principal at Granville Correctional Institution's Academic School which is housed in a medium and close custody men's prison. I have a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminology and a master's degree in educational leadership. I have been a public-school teacher, assistant principal, and principal over the span of the last 20 years in rural North Carolina. My research is conducted using the experiences of rural high school principals who work in North Carolina.

I have a background in working with at-risk students. I believe that with a proper educator and student relationship, all students can be successful. My philosophy of education is, simply, that every student can learn. Educators, however, must adapt to understand the needs of each learner academically, as well as socially and emotionally. In September of 2023, while performing my normal principal duties in the school, I turned around to see my former 7th-grade student enter the prison academic school. He was now 20 years old and serving five years on a felony charge. I learned that he had quit school in 11th grade after a long-term suspension. It was at that moment that I saw the real-life phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline. Since that day, I vowed to use my knowledge and position as an educational leader to do what is in my power to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

I believe that with perseverance and high expectations, we can see students, regardless of age and ability, work to meet educational expectations. In my current role, I serve incarcerated adult men who, by North Carolina law, are still afforded the opportunity to attain a high school diploma in the North Carolina public school system and continue their educational opportunities until the age of 22. I have elected to conduct a qualitative collective case study to better understand the effect that zero-tolerance discipline policies have on the school-to-prison pipeline based on the experiences of rural high school principals. My research is grounded in my commitment to ensuring that all students receive the best possible education to become successful adults contributing to society, rather than forgotten statistics in the criminal justice system.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study. For consistency and the purpose of this research, the key terms are defined as follows:

- ***Achievement Gap:*** An achievement gap illustrates the disparity in academic achievement and performance between subgroups of students (Ansell, 2004).
- ***Alternative Education Program:*** An alternative education program is a state-approved program designed to meet the needs of eligible students who are at risk of academic failure. Alternative education programs are used primarily for behavior modification arrangements instead of expulsion (Mittleman, 2018).
- ***At Risk:*** At risk is used to describe students who are at a great probability of failing academically or dropping out of school (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

- ***Discipline Gap:*** The discipline gap refers to the disproportionality in school disciplinary procedures and outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities (Skiba, et al., 2011).
- ***Exclusionary Discipline/Punishment:*** Exclusionary punishment includes in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, school-based arrests, school-based referrals to the juvenile or criminal justice system, and voluntary or involuntary placement in an alternative education program (Mittleman, 2018).
- ***Expulsion:*** Expulsion is the permanent removal of a student for at least 365 calendar days. The policy is imposed by the school board (Skiba, et al., 2011).
- ***Incarceration:*** Incarceration refers to any institutional correction facility used by the justice system for both juveniles and adults (Elrod & Ryder, 2005).
- ***Institutional Racism:*** Institutional racism refers to the inequitable and systematic discrimination by race, typically one that is marginalized, in our society by political, economic, or legal systems (Darby & Rury, 2018).
- ***Intersectionality:*** The intricate network of mutual connections and often various divisive conflicts that individuals and movements face as they navigate the convergence of race, gender, and class in political and social life (University of California, 2012).
- ***Marginalized Student:*** The act of treating a person or group of people as unimportant by removing their power or treating them as if they have no relevance in society (Darby & Rury, 2018).

In this research, students referred to as Black, Brown, Hispanic, or low socio-economic status are considered marginalized sub-groups.

- ***Rural:*** A rural area is a geographic area located outside of towns and cities. These areas have low population density, few businesses, and large agricultural and forestry areas (Economic Research Service, 2020).
- ***School-to-Prison Pipeline:*** The school-to-prison pipeline is described as the collective system of local, state, and federal policies and procedures that have pushed many children and young adults out of mainstream schools and into the criminal justice system (Skiba, et.al., 2012).
- ***Zero-Tolerance Policies:*** Zero-tolerance policies refer to public education disciplinary strategies that prohibit school administrators from exercising discretion based on the circumstances when a rule is broken. Zero-tolerance policies require a pre-determined punishment regardless of the circumstances of the offense (Henry, 2022).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. In this chapter, there is an introduction that includes the research problem, purpose statement, research questions, statement of significance, and definitions of key terms that will be used in the research. In the second chapter, a literature review is provided that includes three substantial sections: student discipline, zero-tolerance policies, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Each section is separated into subsections to better understand the literature. The third chapter describes the methodology used in this study, which includes the research positionality statement, research design, research questions, site selections and participants, instrumentation, data collection, and approach to data analysis. The findings of the study will be thoroughly analyzed and presented in chapter four. In the final chapter, the

study's findings, implications, recommendations, and conclusions will be introduced and discussed.

Summary

The school-to-prison pipeline prevents disenfranchised students from equal and equitable access to educational opportunities otherwise afforded to their peers (Annamma et al., 2014; Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Fasching-Varner et al., 2014). Moreover, this disproportionality connects and further encapsulates the subjective and oppressive educational practices to the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon through punitive discipline practices and school exclusion (Love, 2019). This exploratory qualitative collective case study will determine the effect of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline through the lens of rural high school principals in North Carolina. Through this study, insight into the public education system will be seen while also revealing the impacts of zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural high schools in North Carolina.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The school-to-prison pipeline is a phenomenon that has emerged because of negative outcomes in a student's life following harsh punishments using out-of-school suspension and expulsion through zero-tolerance policies. As Ruiz (2017) concluded, "Incidents such as the school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, further increased adult's unease regarding school safety and encouraged the adoption of additional measures aimed at securing campus welfare" (p. 809). Due to elevated statistics in school violence, zero-tolerance policies have increased in use since the 1990s. While these policies may seem logical, there is research that shows that zero-tolerance policies are not used to equitably discipline students in schools. "Although lawmakers initially crafted zero-tolerance policy regulations to address the possession of guns and deadly weapons on school grounds, these regulations have been expanded to include more offenses, some of which pose no serious danger" (Glenn, 2019, p. 12). Zero-tolerance policies disproportionately channel minorities (Barnes & Motz, 2018) and special needs students (Fitzgerald et al., 2019) into the criminal justice system. These policies are creating a volume of students with criminal justice system identification which removes many educational opportunities for their future.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the existing research regarding the use of zero-tolerance policies and their impact on the school-to-prison pipeline. This study will focus on the experiences of rural high school administrators in North Carolina who discipline in districts using zero-tolerance policies. In this literature review, I will thoroughly review the impact of severe discipline practices on the school-to-prison pipeline and the populations adversely affected. This chapter will begin with a review of student discipline and the impact of referrals. The implementation of zero-tolerance policies will be discussed next which will also

include the consequences of executing this disciplinary method. Finally, the school-to-prison pipeline will be explained which will include the consequences of labels and criminalization of a student.

Student Discipline

Discipline of students with inappropriate behaviors in school is both necessary and suitable when being used to teach proper conduct and to assist students as they make the best decisions for themselves. After the 19th century, most urban school districts eliminated harsh corporal punishments from their schools (Butchart & McEwan, 1998). School leaders began to see a need to reinforce positive behavior rather than only focus on students with negative behavior. Allman and Slate (2011) point out that the drastic change seen in classroom discipline was due to the promotion of civility and the inclusion of rewards when only punishing and penalizing had been used. New methods of discipline based on rewards and relationships were meant to increase engagement and achievement for marginalized students. Butchart and Ewan (1998) explained that classroom management and discipline policies continued to evolve to deter from a culture of shaming and humiliating poor students. For students to have behavioral achievement while succeeding academically, discipline must be targeted similarly to achievement in math and reading. As new discipline policies emerged which include building relationships with students, Butchart and McEwan (1998) noted that teachers began to extend their own disciplinary authority in their classrooms with less reliance on school administration. While continuing to use reward systems, American schooling has incorporated and continued to heavily rely on zero-tolerance policies enacted after mass school shootings which were primarily to combat the heightened safety concerns. It is with these new policies that drastic discipline measures were erected.

There are specific rule violations that require suspension and, in some collective cases, expulsion. School leaders must make intentional efforts to allow students the best education opportunities even when implementing discipline policies. “The promise of free and compulsory public education in the United States is a promise of equal opportunity and access to the American dream” (Heitzeg, 2009, p.1). When disciplinary action is required for specific student behavior, focus should be applied to intervention and prevention strategies to address student behavior while also ensuring that the student is afforded the best education possible. As classroom management and discipline techniques evolve, educators must understand the different contexts and backgrounds of students. They must ensure that they model their instruction to reach the needs of all students regardless of their background or ability for the success of the student and educator.

Student Discipline in Rural Areas

Discipline in rural areas refers to the methods and practices used to maintain order, control behavior, and enforce rules and regulations in rural communities. In most rural settings, discipline in the school relies on traditional values and norms in which parents, family members, and communities play a role (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2010). Rural areas often have strong common values and rules that are disseminated throughout the school in the area. “Most practices have a high emphasis on respect for authority, adherence to standards, and the importance of relationships both within the family and those in the community” (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022, p. 166). Discipline in rural areas often requires a combination of positive reinforcement, communication, and punishment when necessary.

Rural schools have different disciplinary approaches compared to urban schools. Due to opportunities for smaller class sizes and closer relationships between teachers, students, and

families, discipline in rural schools often focuses on building relationships, fostering a sense of community, and addressing behavioral issues through counseling and mediation (Insley, 2001). Discipline in rural areas can face unique challenges, such as limited access to services, isolation, and cultural barriers. As Dunbar and Villarruel expound, “Challenges of rural areas include a lack of access to mental health services or alternative disciplinary programs” (p. 354). As a result, rural communities may struggle with discipline that requires out-of-school suspension and expulsion because there is no plan in place to ensure education for students in these predicaments. On the contrary, Insley (2001) clarifies that the influence of community values and family combined with building relationships and addressing behavioral issues allow rural schools to build relationships and address behavioral issues through a more holistic approach when specific discipline policies are not required for student indiscretions.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Classrooms are small communities complete with student diversity and varying abilities. For each classroom to have the best education and rare occurrences of misconduct, teachers must “hone and develop the knowledge and skills each student already possesses, while at the same time adding new knowledge and skills to that base” (Delpit, 1995, p. 67). A combination of engagement and student ownership in the classroom facilitates proper behavior and fewer discipline referrals. To increase student engagement and ownership, the student must feel understood and accepted in their classroom. Teachers must ensure a classroom that is both saturated with a high level of instructional delivery and projected as a safe learning environment for all students. For this to occur, teachers must understand the culture and background of each student. “Culturally responsive teaching centers on the premise that students learn and achieve at high levels when the instructional delivery is content situated within their own individual

perspectives and experiences” (Kesler, 2011, p. 419). As teachers build their classrooms using unique student experiences, interpersonal relationships are developed, and student behavior increases. Losen (2011) expands, “as student engagement increases, the behavior decreases. Accordingly, increases in student engagement would ultimately void the need for suspension and expulsion” (p. 14).

Fahey (2016) explains, classrooms with positive behavior management and students who are not suspended following a referral are less likely to repeatedly offend than students who do receive suspension after visiting an administrator due to a referral. As Mendel (2021) explains,

Zero-tolerance and other harsh discipline policies that often impose suspensions, expulsions, and arrests increase the likelihood that students will drop out of school.

Students who drop out of school, in turn, are much more likely to go to jail or prison later in life (para. 8).

These findings harbor the idea that schools and educators who safeguard students from an initial suspension may assist in keeping students in school and out of trouble in the future.

Student Behavior and Social-Emotional Learning

In the education field, there is a constant need for transformation and flexibility as leaders attempt to establish best practices and increase achievement in all student populations. Many improvements are focused on curriculum development and instructional practices. Although these improvements are necessary, they do not focus on the whole child and the development of the student’s emotional intelligence. “A key challenge for 21st-century schools involves serving culturally diverse students with varied abilities and motivations for learning” (Durlak, et. al, 2011, p. 405). To develop the emotional intelligence that students need to be successful in academic achievement, many school systems are beginning to incorporate social-emotional

learning (SEL) in their curriculum and lesson plans. “Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process in which adults and children understand and manage emotions. The types of skills acquired from social-emotional learning work to create well-adjusted, responsible people, both young and old” (Positive Action, 2021, par. 2). It is imperative that SEL be incorporated into daily lessons to ensure that students reach their academic goals. To teach students strategies to handle their emotions, SEL is incorporated into academic curriculums with the expectation of a decrease in behaviors that divert students from learning which lessens suspensions and decreases student entrance into the school-to-prison pipeline. “The United States faces the most difficulty today when questioning the ability of students to recognize their emotions since the era of civil rights resulting from preemptive wars, injustices in civil liberties, continuous change in policies, and political unrest” (Wrabel et al., 2018, p. 4). These difficulties and deficiencies are also apparent in students who are inmates in a prison facility. “Traditionally underserved populations, particularly students with disabilities and justice-involved students are more likely to grapple with the negative environments and 3 experiences that inhibit social and emotional development” (Beyer, 2017, p. 7). Educators are entrusted to expand students' abilities and increase their achievement despite any obstacles that students may encounter whether in the classroom or in the outside world including being in the prison population. “The research indicates that well-planned and well-implemented SEL programming can positively affect a broad range of student social, health, behavioral, and academic outcomes” (SEL & Student Benefits, 2020, p. 2). The impact that SEL can provide on achievement and behavior management is detrimental to the breakdown of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Suspension and Dropout Rates

Suspension rates prove to be a growing concern among all school leaders. “Schools who have low suspension rates are more likely to consider the context of the rule violation when making decisions of consequence, while high suspending schools adhere to the discipline policy regardless of the context of the behavior in question” (Skiba et al., 2012, p. 93). The inequities in discipline for certain subgroups of students are also synthesized in the research when understanding the typical discipline policies in schools and the disproportionate effects on particular student groups. The American Psychological Association (2021) reports that “black students receive exclusionary discipline at an inequitable rate compared to white students. Their behaviors are often punished more severely with consequences that often lead to the criminal justice system” (para. 4-5). Researchers estimate that nearly 3 million public school students receive one or more out-of-school suspension (Dutil, 2020). The inequities that are shown in the research among student subgroups must be used when being proactive in reform to decrease referral numbers. “In addition to out-of-school suspensions, black students are more likely to be expelled or referred to law enforcement” (Henry et al., 2021, p. 2). As Henry and colleagues (2021) further explained, “although black males compose a smaller percentage group than their counterparts of other races, they are expelled and introduced to the criminal justice system at much greater rates” (p. 3).

“The disproportionate number of minority students experiencing out-of-school suspension appears to be related to racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system” (Smith, 2015, p. 130). While referrals from school systems introduce many students to the criminal justice system, it is important to note the dropout rate impact that is also seen due to suspensions. Cramer and associates (2014) explain, “dropping out of school makes it difficult to

find a job that offers adequate living wages, which often translates into higher incarceration rates, especially for black males” (p. 462). Dutil (2020) summarizes that there is no research to support African American students misbehaving at a higher rate than white students, however, there is more discipline among the African American subgroup. Suspensions and expulsions can be understood as a catalyst for increases in dropout rates and referrals to the criminal justice system especially for marginalized subgroups. Research indicates that zero-tolerance policies are further impacting the growth of the number of students with consequences that include being removed from the normal educational setting (Dutil, 2020).

Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance policies are a direct contributor to the introduction of students into the criminal justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies lack a uniform definition describing specific behavior as these policies have been implemented in various forms across different schools. Zero-tolerance policies are disciplinary mandates to suspend and exclude students from their normal learning environment for specific offenses (Curran, 2017). Zero-tolerance policies impose automatic, mandatory consequences on students, regardless of their age, intent, circumstances, or prior disciplinary record (Losinski et al., 2014). Policies of this nature do not allow for the use of discretion in the handling of school rule violations by the school administrators.

Innovating school reform and providing safer educational spaces required new discipline policies to be implemented, however, zero-tolerance policies cause students to suffer when suspension and expulsion occur. “There has been mounting evidence that zero-tolerance policies are neither effective nor implemented in a manner that is child-centered or equitable” (Skiba & Peterson, 2000, p.33). Although the state and federal government did not anticipate the school

districts embracing zero-tolerance policies for mandatory punishment, this discipline is being used with children as it was developed to be used with adults in the criminal justice system (Checchio, 2013; Triplett, et. al., 2014). Rather than deter misconduct in educational settings, zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor offenses that are sometimes perceived as pranks or age-appropriate behaviors.

Exclusionary discipline contributes to the racial disparities many students experience in educational settings. Zero-tolerance policies challenge equity among students which leads to diminished learning opportunities for those who are entering an educational arena at a significant disadvantage. Bogale (2016) indicated in her research that zero-tolerance policies are meant to punish children and minimize their learning opportunities. Originally, zero-tolerance policies were introduced to combat the presence of weapons in schools. In 1997, many schools in America extended the realm of zero-tolerance policies to include drugs, alcohol, fighting, and presumably minor offenses (Losinski, et al., 2014). School administrators show a reign of punishment over education as students are removed from classrooms over trivial behaviors that could be managed with proper classroom management training for educators.

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the policies and practices that push our nation's school children, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice system. This pipeline reflects the prioritization of incarceration over education (Heitzeg, 2009). Suspensions and expulsions used to discipline students are found to have academic and societal impacts beyond their one-time use. Zero-tolerance policies encompass a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline with disregard for any other student's needs. Due to the consequences of a student's actions in these districts, criminalization of an act becomes the primary focus rather than the education of the student.

Removing equitable opportunities from students both in disciplinary and educational situations is detrimental to the life successes students can experience. “Zero-tolerance policies mandate the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (Henry et al., 2021, p. 2). The use of zero-tolerance policies is employed in schools because these policies are believed to have the power to remove certain students with the belief that other students will be able to academically excel once the problem behavior is removed. As Skiba (2000) concluded in his research, “Zero-tolerance policies purposely increase the intensity of consequences for all offenders. Yet the practice of punishing relatively minor incidents harshly has been consistently controversial” (p. 3).

Zero-tolerance Policies in Rural Areas

Zero-tolerance policies are not exclusive to urban areas and can also be implemented in rural schools. However, the specific application and enforcement may vary depending on the resources, culture, and values of the rural schools and districts. Like urban areas, rural schools may adopt zero-tolerance policies as a response to concerns about school safety, drug use, violence, or other disruptive behaviors. The aim is to create a safe and orderly learning environment for the entire student population.

Rural schools may face challenges in implementing zero-tolerance policies when alternative disciplinary measures are limited due to resources. As Dunbar and Villarruel (2010) explain, critics argue that zero-tolerance policies can have negative consequences for students, particularly in rural areas where alternative support systems are limited. Students may face harsh punishments ranging from short-term suspensions to expulsions which can seriously disrupt their education and potentially lead to negative long-term consequences. Rural schools are tasked with

balancing the need for school safety with the fair and equitable treatment of students. The use of zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural schools is influenced by factors like that in urban schools, however, the need for community involvement is greater due to a lack of resources and funding in these areas (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022).

Achievement Gaps

Possibly the most controversial aspect of zero-tolerance policies is the use of out-of-school suspension and the impact on student achievement. As previously discussed, research has shown that students out of school do not and cannot learn at the rate of their peers. The expectations for high test scores were meant to motivate teachers through the monetary increase for rewards of high student test scores. Because these tests measure teacher effectiveness, students performing with low scores may have their behavior at a higher area of focus. Bogale's (2016) studies found the following:

Zero-tolerance policies and high-stakes testing have joined together to change the incentive structure for educators, putting many teachers in the unenviable position of having to choose between their students' interests and their self-interest. It is much easier and more "efficient" to simply remove the child from class through punitive disciplinary measures and focus on the remaining students (p. 50).

Uncompromising discipline measures compounded with higher testing expectations allow for student exclusion through policies that have been justified in many school districts.

Many students across the nation are unable to be academically successful due to policies that are implemented in school. Current researchers have confirmed that students who are recipients of exclusionary practices do not have their educational needs met. Exclusionary practices fail to meet students' educational needs and normalize the lower academic expectations

of marginalized student populations which further contributes to the achievement gap and racial disparities in academic performance (Annamma, 2014; Annamma et al., 2014; Fasching-Varner et al., 2017). An increase in suspensions combined with deteriorating academic achievement generates a catalyst for student dropout and school disengagement. As this cycle continues, it is nearly impossible for students to enter adulthood without criminal justice involvement. In many situations, lower-performing students found themselves suspended from school for minor infractions and completely removed from the educational setting in which they could have benefitted.

The discipline enacted using a zero-tolerance policy can influence more than just the educational system. Alvarez (2021) found that suspending students does little to reduce future misbehavior for the disciplined students or their peers. Academic achievement decreased as well as the student view of the school climate. Suspension and exclusionary practices for students create education loss as well as an introduction into the criminal justice system which can include a label and trail of arrests with convictions that are inescapable.

Racial Disparities

As Davison and colleagues (2021) identified, there is a direct correlation between inadequate amounts of operational financing and high rates of discipline data. Districts that receive less money due to poor achievement rates have low graduation rates and high suspension rates. The lack of resources to educate the students in these schools and districts causes the students to be punished through suspensions and expulsions as they are viewed as unteachable. Heise (2017) explains that the student push-out increases the school's average test score while increasing the student's possibility of participating in deviant activities and entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Glenn (2019) found that “Failure to meet the needs of children of color will cause them to drop out of school due to not understanding the curriculum and disengagement, which later brings the court system into the situation” (p. 12). Zero-tolerance has led to “disproportionate rates of injustice for black students and has been implemented with contradictory access across all student groups” (Henry et al., 2021, p. 2). As Robles-Ramamurth and Watson (2019) expounded upon,

Black and Hispanic populations have higher rates of poverty than whites. They are more likely to attend schools with zero-tolerance policies and law enforcement presence on campus, and this increases a student’s chance of being arrested at a young age, expelled, or suspended (p. 4).

Due to these statistics, many Black and Hispanic children are introduced to the juvenile and criminal justice system as early as kindergarten.

As zero-tolerance policies are created and implemented, it is of utmost importance that those leaders executing the policies be cognizant of the implications that may occur. As Henry and colleagues (2021) explained:

Just as definitions of zero-tolerance policies vary, so do the behaviors targeted and consequences applied by the school systems. These discrepancies can lead to systemic racism in the educational system because biases and prejudice affect the interpretation of behavior and selection of consequences (p. 2).

Research shows that “a black student’s chances of being incarcerated are roughly four times greater than those of a white student” (Rovner, 2022, para. 2). Possibly the most detrimental outcome is that expulsion from school puts minority students in non-traditional school settings with very little likelihood that they will re-enter their traditional school which further functions

as a component of institutionalized racism in the education setting (Kim, et. al., 2010). The disparity in punitive discipline is highlighted in most research, however, the impact of systemic racism as a result of the zero-tolerance discipline policy is a topic left open for discussion by many researchers. Systemic racism refers to a system of “assigning value and allocating opportunity based on skin color with an unfair allocation of privileges assigned to different individuals and groups” (Matsuda, et. al., 2020). Systemic racism may occur in purposeful uses while also occurring through the bias of individual school personnel whether intentional or unintentional.

Just as systemic racism affects educational outcomes, so do varying vulnerabilities in children and adolescents. As Mallet (2016) explains, “children and adolescents are involved in the broad school discipline protocols and the smaller number subsequently caught within the school-to-prison pipeline share commonalities and experiences that place them at the higher risk for these outcomes” (p. 565). The commonalities discussed include students from poverty, maltreatment, and special education. As Mallett (2016) reported, students from these backgrounds are more likely to commit delinquent behaviors and be introduced to the criminal justice system while losing education opportunities.

Other individual and community factors also aid in determining the effectiveness of out-of-school suspensions from zero-tolerance policies. “Out-of-school suspension overuse can result in your people losing learning time and leaving schools” (Smith, 2015, p. 134). All groups except Asian American students experience higher rates of out-of-school suspension than white students with or without a disability (Raufu, 2017). The educational discrepancies created using zero-tolerance policies continue to increase between subgroups. Students are losing calamitous amounts of education and becoming criminal justice statistics at alarming rates. As Smith (2015)

found, “With rates of juvenile arrests and subsequent incarcerations rising, zero-tolerance policies may be seen as the source of a new racial and socioeconomic caste in American society” (p. 135).

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline is a social phenomenon of an exclusionary discipline policy where minor offenses in schools are disciplined with zero-tolerance policies which lead students to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Zero-tolerance policies are a large factor in creating the classroom-to-courtroom sensation that occurs for students affected by punitive school discipline policies. “The school-to-prison pipeline is a disturbing trend that funnels poor and minority students out of the K-12 schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system” (McNeal, 2016, p. 286). Furthermore, the growing number of students of color in comparison to white students involved in the school-to-prison pipeline illustrates a disparity in expulsions for minor infractions which establishes a significant disadvantage for African American students by removing them from the educational setting (McNeal, 2016). Even more disturbing is the young age in early primary school when these policies are enforced. Heitzeg (2009) writes:

The embracing of zero-to-tolerance discipline policies by educational systems directly imposes out-of-school suspensions and expulsions on students often for minor infractions that once resulted in a trip to the principal’s office or detention. It is the youth of color who are being tracked into the prison pipeline via media stereotyping, a punishment-oriented juvenile justice system, and educational practices such as zero-tolerance (p. 7).

Rather than promoting a safe and secure educational atmosphere, “harsh zero-tolerance disciplinary policies create a culture of fear in which students are in constant worry of being

suspended, expelled or even arrested” (Bogale, 2016, p. 41). Zero-tolerance policies were originally implemented to deter bad behavior, however, as Wilson (2014) explains, “ironically, the very policies that schools adopted to manage behavior and increase achievement are fostering failure and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 50). Rather than guiding educational achievement and the success of all students, zero-tolerance policies allow students to be pushed out of their schools and into the court system.

Criminalization’s Effect on the Whole Student

The failure to address certain aspects of student’s lives such as abuse and mental health behaviors has contributed to the movement of students from the educational system to the criminal justice system. Heitzeg (2009) explains:

The school-to-prison pipeline has already claimed tens of thousands of young lives.

Fueled by poverty and segregation, an underfunded educational system pressured by high stakes testing and zero-tolerance policies, media misrepresentation of youth crime, and an increasingly draconian justice system, this education and incarceration continues to threaten the future of more students (p. 16).

Consequently, the reentry of school for students who have been introduced to the criminal justice system is nearly unimaginable. As Bogale (2016) elucidates, “Students who enter the juvenile justice system during adolescence face many barriers when attempting to re-enter into traditional schools. The vast majority of these students will not realistically be able to graduate from high school traditionally, nor pursue higher education” (p. 43).

Removal of students from a classroom is detrimental to their future. “Exclusion and suspension have become standard tools for schools to demand obedience and compliance” (Wilson, 2014, p. 50). The education system has promoted removal from class in situations

where learning behaviors could take place. Rather than teach proper behavior and continuing to teach the student, many have found it more accommodating to continue their class and have the student removed by the administration. Ruiz (2017) describes the direct correlation between constant removal from the classroom as a direct precursor to entrance into the juvenile justice system and the increased dropout rate. Both previous circumstances impact the student's ability to gain a job and be a productive citizen in our communities. As Owens explains (2016),

Many of these young people never re-enter the mainstream education system and the loss to society is immeasurable. Not only do communities lose the potential talents that these students hold, but they also commit themselves to expending vast resources for greater than the resources it would take to adequately fund public education to deal with the problems that these students will likely pose when they grow into adults (p. 15).

Student attributes used in the school and community would enhance their existence which depletes once locked in a jail cell.

The Impact of Being Labeled

Among the damage that the school-to-prison pipeline causes is the label of felon that becomes attached to certain impacted justice-involved individuals. Although not labeled felon, there are students who feel the same degree of estrangement when trying to adjust to school. "The risk of later incarceration for students who are suspended or expelled and arrested is also great. For many, going to school has become, literally and figuratively synonymous with going to jail" (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 2). The label of felon is nearly inevitable for these students, especially minorities and those of low socioeconomic level. Smith (2015) describes the movement of people into the prison system via a post from NPR host Davies (2012):

People are swept into the criminal justice system, particularly in poor communities of color. Young adults in this situation are shuttled into prison, branded as criminals and felons, and then when they're released, they're relegated to a permanent second-class status. Many of the old forms of discrimination that we supposedly left behind during the Jim Crow era are suddenly legal again, once you've been branded as a felon (p. 135). Research reiterates the distinct impact the label of felon can have on young adults with the loss of hope for their future.

Schools must be a secure environment for students and educators, however, more has to be done to ensure students stay in the classroom and have the educational opportunities that are afforded them by law. "No student, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability or socioeconomic status should be targeted to fail in the very environment that was created for him or her to thrive" (Smith, 2015, p. 139). As Skiba (2014) explains, "widespread discipline practices of suspension or expulsion and arrest for school behavior problems are turning kids in conflict into criminal offenders and creating an intentional direct line to prisons" (p. 30). Minor misbehaviors are targeted by zero-tolerance policies rather than addressing underlying issues to assist with conflict resolution and positive behavior practices. This, in turn, intentionally funnels students into the criminal justice system.

Conceptual Framework

This research analysis will be framed through the Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The intersectionality of these two frameworks will illustrate how "students of color are positioned in the school-to-prison pipeline" (Annamma et al., 2014, p. 55). Critical Race Theory and Labeling Theory allow researchers to see the effects associated with labeling and categorizing certain individuals.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory has been found to impact many areas of study including education and law. There are five major components or tenets of CRT, in which I will focus on tenets one, two, and five. As Ladson-Billings and Tate explain, tenet one is the notion that racism is an occurrence that most people of color experience. Tenet two is the idea that the interest of minorities is added in policy and procedure when it is also the interest of the majority in charge. Tenet five is the concept that race is not a fixed or natural category but is created and maintained through systems of power and privilege. It further states that whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation. Through the three focus principles, students of color are believed to be a victim of bias when entering the educational setting as white students appear to receive privilege based primarily on the color of their skin.

As Delgado (1995) explained, Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1970s from the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman because of their distress over the slow movement of racial reform in the United States. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain through the CRT lens that racism is deeply embedded in American society to the point that it is viewed as ordinary. CRT was founded in inequities of those that had been traditionally marginalized due to the color of their skin “and has grown to address the intersections of racialized experiences with gender, language, and immigration status” (Annamma et al., 2014, p. 55). Among these experiences, are the persistent racial inequalities in the educational system and the disproportionate disciplining of black students. Depending upon the discipline needed, the legal system could be involved. As Sawchuk (2021) explains:

Critical race theory is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old. The core idea is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies (para 5). Race continues to be a significant factor when it comes to inequities in the United States. CRT encompasses that just as civil rights battles fought for equal opportunity for students of color in comparison to white students for curriculum, instruction, and assessment in education, the same must emerge when discussing zero-tolerance discipline policies that impact students of color at alarming rates (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19). CRT and its usefulness in understanding inequities must be at the forefront of the intersection of education and law as created by zero-tolerance policies and their impact on the school-to-prison pipeline.

Labeling Theory

Negative stereotypes that are attached to deviant behaviors cause school-aged children and young adults to be labeled. “The Labeling Theory states that individuals behave in ways that reflect how others label them” (Nickerson, 2021, para. 1). Labeling theory is a sociological theory that has associated itself with educational policies and principles over time. “The central feature of labeling theory is the self-fulfilling prophecy in which the labeled individuals correspond to the label in terms of delinquent behavior” (Nickerson, 2021, para. 4). This idea can further portray itself as how sociologists have discussed that people see themselves as others see them through different interactions. These ideas may further themselves from simply labeling into deviant self-concepts and social exclusion (Bernburg, 2009).

The labeling theory was introduced into sociological studies in 1963 by Howard Becker. According to Becker (1963), “to be labeled criminal carries a number of connotations specifying auxiliary traits characteristic of anyone bearing the label” (p. 38). As Becker published in many

of his works, especially those that appealed to criminologists, the label of “deviant” can easily surpass someone’s true identity. A central feature of the labeling theory argues that socially oppressed and underprivileged groups are more likely than other groups to encounter labeling. Images of criminal behavior are oftentimes shown with stereotypes of minorities and lower-class people (Quillan & Pager, 2001) which leaves members of these groups feeling stigmatized in normal, daily settings and activities. The situational context of the habitual judgment of a category of people is known to enhance criminal deviant behavior while also creating exclusionary actions by others (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Nickerson, 2023).

Those affected by the labeling theory retain a deviant self-concept even at young ages. Nickerson (2023) explains that the consequence of being labeled is externalized by the concept of oneself simply based on the people around them. “Once a person is identified as deviant, it is extremely difficult to remove the label. As members of a subgroup are considered negatively in schools and other societal niches, children and young adults are more likely to internalize the label and, again, engage in misconduct” (Crossman, 2019, para. 3). The consequences of prior labels and stigmas can lead to being completely occluded in educational and career opportunities while also having negative effects on family and community. The labeling theory ultimately leads a person to live a self-fulfilling prophecy of deviant behavior.

To truly understand the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline, researchers must fully understand the interconnected nature of racial and socioeconomic inequities on affected people. CRT and labeling theory intersect through the oppression and discrimination of minority races and subgroups. Just as CRT is included in most facets of life as a pattern in America, the labeling theory is also woven into American life. The negative connotations that are underlying in CRT are continued through social constructs that label and

stigmatize children and young adults in educational settings. “The core idea of CRT is that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but something institutionalized within the structures and policies of our legal system” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 33). These individuals are more vulnerable to labels and mistreatment due to the inequities shown to specific minority groups. It is at this point that the intersectionality of CRT and the labeling theory put an exposed and unprotected population of people at an elevated risk for incarceration and introduction to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Conclusion

Zero-tolerance policies automatically impose harsh, life-changing punishments on students without regard to individual student circumstances. This literature review reflected the bias and systemic racism that is performed daily in educational systems. “Increased policing and decreased funding for wellness and health promotion in schools with large populations of minoritized students, in addition to implicit or explicit biases among school faculty and staff contribute to racial disparities in school disciplinary approaches” (Aronowitz et al., 2020, p. 57). Researchers agree that there must be strategies put in place to identify and support students who show at-risk behaviors for disciplinary actions and to continue education for school staff to increase awareness about systemic racism (McNeal, 2016; Skiba, 2014; Smith, 2015). Most of the research literature speaks of students while rarely specifying specific differences in urban and rural students.

Skiba and Rausch (2006) promote educational leaders focusing on social-emotional awareness, screening for mental health, and collaboration between education and the criminal justice system. It must become a priority to understand and alleviate the issues that thrust students from the classroom to the criminal justice system. “Prisons spawn a new generation of

future prisoners: there are more than two million children with at least one incarcerated parent, and these youth are five times more likely to end up in prison themselves” (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). Zero-tolerance policies are not shown to improve school safety or student achievement and behavior in the literature. Minority representation in discipline data using zero-tolerance policies has been amplified while minor behavior infractions are criminalized.

Education is an important aspect of society and in the growth of our children in both rural and urban areas. Education enhances cognition, highlights our skills, and can be an important model used in character development (Mojica, 2021, p. 1). Regardless of the importance of education, the setting for learning is found to be a place where students become part of the juvenile justice and eventually the criminal justice system through the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies. “The school-to-prison pipeline is jeopardizing the future of thousands of children every day by removing students from their school-learning environment for trivial, adolescent behavior” (McNeal, 2016, p. 288).

As Skiba (2014) explained, there is no contradiction in the belief that the safety of our children, whether at home or in school, is the top priority. Whether the cause is dropping out of school or expulsion that leads to introducing a student to the criminal justice system, the school-to-prison pipeline is a crisis in the United States. As McNeal (2016) explained,

Despite the overwhelming empirical data indicating the harmful effects of school disciplinary policies on students of color, there is an absence of systemic reform efforts to address this phenomenon and the lives continually impacted because of policies regarding zero-tolerance in the environment students should be learning rather than becoming criminal offenders” (p.298).

Zero-tolerance policies have continued negative impact on students. Rather than approach student behavior as something that can be improved, students are meshed into a system where their actions lead them to become entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is used to seek to understand information from specific experiences of individuals in their lifetime. Qualitative research allows the researcher to use an interpretive approach to understand what is being studied. A significant basis of this research is social experience. “Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to provide researchers with process-based, narrated, storied, data that is more closely related to the human experience” (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 26). Qualitative research is most appropriate to address the relationship between zero-tolerance discipline policies and the school-to-prison pipeline because patterns and themes based on rural North Carolina administrators' individual experiences will be the focus. “Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 142). This type of research seeks to provide deep insights into the behavior, motivations, and perspectives of those participating in the study.

Within qualitative research, I have chosen to do a collective case study. Collective case studies are an in-depth analysis and description of real issues, such as zero-tolerance policies, using data from interview questions from multiple sources. “Collective case studies are comprehensive descriptions of an individual collective case and its analysis that highlight a developmental factor, which means that the collective cases are generated and evolve over time” (Starman, 2013, p. 31). The study investigated the impact that zero-tolerance policies have on the school-to-prison pipeline in rural North Carolina. To understand this relationship, it is imperative to understand each administrator’s experience with the zero-tolerance policy as discipline for their students and how that discipline policy impacted students over time.

I chose high school principals in rural North Carolina as my focus for the collective case study. Although studies of this nature have been conducted, this study reveals the impact on student and school success from the point of view of the principal which has limited research. Information from principals in rural areas, specifically, is nearly non-existent. As the principal is the primary disciplinarian and instructional leader, this study also reveals the ability or inability of a student to be academically successful when the principal is forced to implement zero-tolerance discipline policies that increase the likelihood of the introduction of students to the criminal justice system.

Research in rural areas is important for several reasons. Rural areas often have unique characteristics and challenges that differ from urban and suburban areas. The high school principal has expertise and knowledge of the situations that they have encountered in their tenure which allows me to further explore the influence that zero-tolerance discipline policies have in rural areas. Conducting research in rural areas ensured that the experience and perspective of these communities are adequately represented in policy decisions.

It is important to understand the impact zero-tolerance policies have on students in rural areas who cannot receive the resources needed to confront challenges such as mental health needs, poverty, and alternative educational experiences. My research in rural areas sheds light on disparities in the application of zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline. It identified if certain groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities, low-income students, or students with disabilities were disproportionately affected by these policies in rural areas.

Overall research in rural areas is crucial to ensure that the experiences and needs of rural communities are considered in efforts to address the impact of zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline. This research provides evidence to support advocacy efforts aimed at

reforming these policies and promoting more equitable and supportive educational environments in rural schools. It will help to inform policy, promote equity, and improve educational outcomes for rural students.

Research Questions

This qualitative collective case study investigated the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline through the lens of rural high school principals in North Carolina. As stated in Chapter 1, the research questions investigated in this qualitative collective case study are:

1. How do rural high school principals feel about zero-tolerance policies?
2. What are the experiences of rural high school principals when applying zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural school districts?
 - a. How do rural principals feel about the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline in rural schools?
3. How do exclusionary discipline policies and practices such as suspension and expulsion contribute to achievement gaps and racial disparities in school discipline?

Table 0.1

Data Collection Table

Research Question	Source of Information	Data Collection
1	Rural high school principals	Interviews
2	Rural high school principals	Interviews
2a	Rural high school principals	Interviews
3	Rural high school principals NC school system data (by principal's district)	Interviews Civil Rights Data Collection through the Southern Coalition for Social Justice

Theoretical Framework

The labeling theory is a distinct sociological perspective that is specifically seen in the analysis of social phenomena such as the school-to-prison pipeline. The theory emphasizes that prior discipline offenses and being classified as a behavior problem can lead to being categorized as such as students move into new grade levels. The labeling theory also considers the connection of race when individuals are labeled and stigmatized. The theory recognizes that race does not operate in isolation but interacts with other social identities to shape the lived experiences of affected people.

The labeling theory framed my research questions to ensure that I am cognizant of the impact that classifications and labels can have on affected groups of people. The theory provides a lens through which to examine the dynamics of classification inequality on students in rural areas in North Carolina through the perspectives of their principals. Through this theory, I developed questions that would explain the impact on marginalized or labeled students without specifically identifying subgroups in my questions. Integrating the labeling theory into my research allows me to evaluate social processes and structural factors that contribute to labeling and racial inequality in zero-tolerance policy discipline and their implications for marginalized subgroups. Through my discussion in Chapter IV, I will explore the impact of Critical Race Theory in my study.

Site Selection and Participants

In selecting the sites for this study, a purposeful sampling method was employed to include rural communities in North Carolina. Area and participant selection are a crucial step that significantly impacts the richness of the study. To select the site for this qualitative collective case study, several factors were considered. These factors included: the research

question, participant accessibility, and the willingness of participants to participate. I also ensured there was site diversity regarding demographics, perspectives, and experiences. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research as an intentional effort for the identification and selection of relevant participants in a particular sample (Patton, 1990). The participants in my research are those who met the following criteria: rural high school administrators in North Carolina who currently work in a school that uses the zero-tolerance policy as discipline for students. North Carolina was chosen to capture a range of rural contexts and allow for a comprehensive examination of the zero-tolerance policy and the school-to-prison pipeline connection in different rural settings. Individuals were identified who could provide valuable insight and detailed perspectives relating to zero-tolerance policy discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. Research does not quantify a single acceptable number of participants in qualitative research, however, Cresswell (2008) suggested between five and 20. I had a total of eight participants interviewed in this collective case study to ensure a sufficient depth of data for analysis.

Recruitment was conducted through email contact with possible participants who met the criteria. Once participants agreed to participate, consent forms were provided where their voluntary participation and confidentiality were emphasized. Principals interviewed are identified by pseudonym to protect confidentiality. I disclosed the purpose and significance of the study to participants to highlight the importance of the need to interview each of them and gain their trust and participation. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, anonymity, and data protection were strictly adhered to throughout the study.

District Description

Districts were selected for research through a process involving the principals of the schools. Principals interviewed for this research arise from five districts in rural North Carolina. Principals were chosen based on certain criteria relevant to the study, and their agreement to participate was confirmed. This selection ensured that the schools within the districts were suitable for conducting interviews and collecting the necessary data for the research.

Instrumentation

The first instrument that I used for data collection was semi-structured interviews. There was an interview protocol followed that also allowed for follow-up questions when needed. “The semi-structured interview is more powerful than other types of interviews for qualitative research because it allows for researchers to acquire in-depth information and evidence from interviewees while considering the focus of the study” (Mashuri et al., 2022, p. 26). The participants answered open-ended questions which allowed them to elaborate on their unique experiences in their tenure as principals using zero-tolerance policies in rural North Carolina. In the research, instrumentation needed to be selected that aligned with the research goals and allowed for an in-depth understanding of the collective case being investigated. Semi-structured questions allowed for new questions to develop from the discussions.

Document Analysis

Reports from the county that employs each principal were obtained from The Southern Coalition for Social Justice website and the North Carolina School Report Card using the 2022-2023 school year. The Southern Coalition for Social Justice is a non-profit organization based in North Carolina and compiles data regarding social justice issues using information received from the United States Office of Civil Rights. The reports collected are used to publish data on various

aspects of educational equity, including discipline disparities and academic achievement by race which includes a racial equity report card for each county in North Carolina. The specific data reported can include suspension and expulsion rates by race, as well as academic achievement indicators such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and enrollment in advanced courses. This data helps identify inequities and disparities in educational outcomes for different racial and ethnic groups. The information from each county in rural North Carolina represented by principals interviewed was analyzed by identifying themes and drawing conclusions from results understand key findings.

The North Carolina School Report card provides data to the public regarding specific school, county, and state level data comparison. The data presented provides a comprehensive look at multiple areas of each school including academic growth, characteristics of the students and school, as well as student performance. Information on the school environment is also included as well as unique programs and initiatives at the school for stakeholders to be able to make educated comparisons of schools and districts in North Carolina.

Data Collection

Data was collected for my study from eight current administrators in rural high schools in North Carolina that use zero-tolerance policies as a discipline tool. Due to professional networks throughout my career, I was able to find rural high school principals in this area to participate in my research. Interviews of these participants were conducted over two months. Interview questions were planned before the interview. Each interview took approximately thirty minutes to one hour. The interview consisted of 15 questions about participants' educational and professional work experiences, zero-tolerance policies that are currently used in the school in

which they work, and specific experiences with the implementation of zero-tolerance policies and the impact on students.

Each participant met with me face to face at a location of their choice, which included their professional office or their home where they felt most comfortable answering the questions. Because the questions are relatively sensitive given their current job, I made myself available to meet them in a location in which they did not have to be concerned about others hearing their experiences when answering the questions. Each interview was anonymous with current and future confidentiality ensured.

The interviews were initiated with an informed consent document. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed using a recording device. Written notes were also recorded throughout which included particular references to the zero-tolerance policies that participants shared as well as their reactions to the questions. Once transcription was complete, patterns and key themes were identified through coding and categorizing information. Through transcription, the original context of information was maintained. Using transcription in analysis, transparency is provided in the research process.

Each question in the interview was generated to answer the research question regarding the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline. A table distinguishing each question in their specific order was created. The reasoning for each question was also discussed to ensure interviewees had ample understanding of the issues being investigated through their personal experiences.

Table 3.2 displays the specific purpose of each interview question and Appendix B contains a list of the interview questions.

Table 0.2*Purpose of Interview Questions*

Interview Question	Purpose/Research Question
One and Two	Get to know the personal/educational background of the participant
Three, Four, Five, and Six	What are zero-tolerance policies used and participant's feelings on policy and fairness in use?
Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, and Eleven	What are observations of implementing zero-tolerance policies with all races and are there racial disparities or targets of particular subgroups? How are students affected?
Twelve	What are the educational opportunities for students after suspension/expulsion?
Thirteen and Fourteen	What should the execution of the zero-tolerance policies be with incorporating a school resources officer? What experiences have been observed between students and School Resource Officers?
Fifteen	Final Comments

The first two interview questions were created to gain more personal knowledge of the participant as well as learn more about their educational background. These questions were also used to lead the interview to help establish a comfortable dialogue between the participant and the researcher. The following four questions were designed to understand the participants' knowledge of zero-tolerance policies in the discipline used in their school while also gaining an understanding of the fairness of the use of the policy from their administrator's lens. The next five questions were asked to explore any noticeable disparities when using zero-tolerance policies as well as targets set towards any particular subgroup of students. Question 12 was created to investigate the educational opportunities that are rendered to students impacted by zero-tolerance policy discipline. The following two questions were designed to understand the

use of the school resource officer in the discipline process using zero-tolerance policies and to understand the experiences witnessed by the administrators. Question 15 was incorporated into the interview for participants to have the opportunity to share any information that they felt was relevant to the interview.

To retrieve school district data on suspension, achievement gaps, and racial disparities, I accessed the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights via their website. Through this website, I was able to obtain yearly data regarding discipline and academic achievement by race. Through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, I was directed to find data regarding specific county information on the website identified as the Southern Coalition for Social Justice. Data for each county in NC is available with a focus on disparities in Career and College Readiness, suspension by race, and criminal justice-involved complaints that were school-related.

Data Analysis

Data analysis can be understood as the process of constructing succinct statements from specific circumstances into an overall explanation of a given phenomenon (LeCompte, 2000). For this method of data analysis to be accomplished, LeCompte (2000) contends that researchers must set aside their past experiences and biases to understand and analyze the experiences of the participants. I scheduled one meeting with each participant with each meeting scheduled to last approximately one hour. After all the interviews with the participants were completed, I familiarized myself with the data by thoroughly reading transcripts and listening to the interviews multiple times over two weeks to find the important and exact information that the participants relayed in their interviews. This practice is recommended by Smith and colleagues (2022) to ensure that key takeaways are captured.

Participant interviews were carefully examined for emerging themes and meaningful patterns. “Classifying and coding qualitative data produces a framework for organizing and describing what has been collected during fieldwork” (Patton, 2002, p. 465). My initial cycle of coding was manual coding of each transcript for me to ensure that I did not overlook specific words or themes. “Manual coding can be carried out by selecting segments of text or a specific quotation to be coded” (Basit, 2003, p. 149). Through manual coding, I found similarities and assigned codes to the segments of the data that were relevant to the research questions. These codes were short labels that captured the essence of the information obtained from the participants' answers. At this phase, my goal was to “identify specific ways by which the participants talk about, understand, and think about an issue” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 89). I identified words and phrases that linked responses of participants.

Once manual coding was completed and the codes were extracted, I began the second cycle of coding. The second coding cycle used pattern coding. Pattern coding is a method of grouping codes into categories and themes (Basit, 2003). I assigned initial codes to specific text. These codes were representative of significant concepts and actions. Using categories, based on similarities, I created a hierarchical structure that organized the codes into broader categories or themes. The frequencies in which the codes appeared signaled prominence of particular themes. I also noted how often certain words and phrases appeared together in order to remember their significance.

As coding progressed, I identified patterns, connections, and themes within the coded data. While analyzing participants' responses to find connections and patterns to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the overall picture, I considered the data in its entirety and explored how different pieces of information related to each other to form a more complete and

integrated analysis. During this examination of the data, I kept the importance of having an open mind and not relying on previous thoughts to ensure I was seizing the importance of the experiences of the principals and their experiences of implementing zero-tolerance policies. I specified three themes for the findings of the research to illustrate the relationship between zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline in rural North Carolina. I interpreted my findings and concluded using a conceptual framework that merged Critical Race Theory and Labeling Theory as discussed earlier. Finally, the findings were reported to recommend further steps and research.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are important aspects of qualitative research. Bashir and colleagues (2008) define reliability as

The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable (p. 37).

Often, in qualitative research, subjective interpretations of data are used. Several strategies were used to ensure that my research is reliable. These strategies included reflexivity, validity, and transferability. The reliability and validity of the findings are strengthened through the recording and transcribing of data discussed earlier.

Reflexivity was used in my research by being transparent about my own biases and perspectives throughout my research process. Critical reflection and clear documentation were used to ensure my role and potential influence on data collection and analysis did not occur.

Clearly defined research procedures, including data collection and coding processes allowed for transparency and potential replication of the study.

Validity refers to the “appropriateness of any research value, tools and techniques, and processes, including data collection” (Mohamad et al., 2015). Golafshani (2015) also ensured that the methodology, sampling process, data analysis, and conclusions drawn were reasonable in validity examination. As qualitative research aims to capture the complexity and richness of human experiences, my research must be deemed valid.

My research is credible in that findings are demonstrated accurately and represented participants' perspectives and experiences as they relayed them. Member checking was employed to ensure credibility in the research findings. “Member checking consists of taking data and interpretation back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2010, p. 127). Summaries of the interviews were shared with each participant for them to review and confirm that the takeaways were accurate and their intended accounts of their personal experiences.

The findings are transferable detailed descriptions of the research, participants, and document analysis. The data collection methods are provided. My objectivity is apparent in the findings to ensure confirmability. In my research, I emphasized the importance of ensuring rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Importance of Interviews

In qualitative collective case studies, interviewing and firsthand participant information hold significant value for several reasons. Interviews allow for depth of understanding, contextualization and multiple perspectives. Interviews provide detailed insight into participants experiences, perceptions and emotions. The depth of understanding that only firsthand

information can provide is crucial for exploring the complexities of the research. Participant explanation of their lived experiences offers a rich contextualized view that goes beyond surface-level observations (Kvale, 2007).

Contextualization allows researchers to gather context-specific information that can explain why and how certain phenomena occur within the particular collective case being studied. The information gained is critical to ensure that conclusions are valid and applicable to the specific circumstance being studied (Patton, 2002). Firsthand accounts help situate the findings within the participants' unique circumstance which enhances the relevance of the information presented in the study.

Multiple perspectives in interviews allows for the inclusion of diverse participant experiences. These experiences provide a range of perspectives that can reveal difference aspects in the events being used to answer the research question. Multiple perspectives are considered a highlight to the value of capturing varying perspectives through interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the collective case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This multiplicity of views leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Safeguards Against Researcher Bias

Ensuring the nonexistence of researcher bias was crucial in my research. I have been educated through multiple courses and training to understand bias and incorporate strategies to minimize it. I developed a clear research design and adhered to established protocols which reduced biased decision-making during the research process. I also documented the data analysis procedure, including coding procedures to ensure transparency. At multiple stages in the research process, I purposely stopped the research and review of interviews to intentionally reflect on the used research strategies to ensure that I did not compromise the credibility of the study.

Throughout the research process, I also used journaling to maintain detailed records and decisions for my own accountability of identifying and examining areas of potential bias.

I implemented these strategies and expectations to minimize bias which impacted and enhanced the credibility of my research. I also acknowledge that the complete elimination of bias is challenging, however, strategic plan was created to mitigate possible bias which maintains the integrity of my research.

Ethical Issues

To ensure human subject protection, the Internal Review Board (IRB) at NC State University was used. The IRB ensured that my research met ethical standards and that the rights and welfare of human participants were protected. The design of my study, procedures, possible risks and benefits were analyzed to determine whether the study was ethical. The IRB also ensured that confidentiality and privacy would be protected. My study does not include vulnerable populations.

This research benefits all populations through the raised awareness of the effects of zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural areas. By addressing the systemic factors that cause the school-to-prison pipeline, my research with rural high school principals will innovate educational environments that support the success and well-being of all students. The major risk for participants was the possible fear of their district leaders gaining access to their beliefs and judgments of the zero-tolerance policies they are expected to enact. However, without research identifying inequities, the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline is not able to truly be understood. The information gained in this study will allow advocates to demand policy changes. Through policy changes the number of students who enter the criminal justice system will be reduced.

Participants being interviewed for my study received informed consent. Their participation was voluntary with sufficient time given to ensure understanding of my research and their involvement. I clearly explained my study to include the purpose of my research, what the participant will be asked to do, and potential risks or benefits. Any questions or concerns that they communicated were answered. I explained the measures taken for confidentiality and privacy which included data anonymity and secure storage. Participants signed a written consent form that summarized key information about the research, their rights, and contact information for any questions that they could have. Informed consent ensured that participants understood that their well-being was of utmost importance. With informed consent, participants had the necessary information to make a knowledgeable decision about their participation upon agreement to be interviewed.

Conclusion

The current study employed a collective case study approach to gain a more detailed understanding of principals' views on zero tolerance policies and their relationship to the school-to-prison pipeline. “The school-to-prison pipeline is a commonly used metaphor that was developed to describe the many ways in which schools have become a conduit to the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (Crawley, 2018, p. 1). To understand this relationship, this study was conducted which allowed those who are involved from the beginning of the discipline process to tell their story and provide information regarding the enforcement of zero-tolerance discipline policies in rural areas of North Carolina.

To address and further understand the impact of zero-tolerance discipline policies on the school-to-prison pipeline, a qualitative research collective case study was the perfect model to use to study this information. The sample population of this study was eight principals employed

in rural counties in North Carolina who implement zero-tolerance discipline practices. Through conducting interviews, I explored the zero-tolerance policies as well as their use in eight rural high schools. To further acknowledge and incorporate the frameworks that were used to analyze the data, I ensured anonymity and confidentiality to create an environment of honesty and transparency when discussing issues such as race in the implementation of the policies. Through a collective case study in qualitative research, I had others share their experiences to find common themes and reveal more understanding of the phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline. Using personal stories, the collective case studies are valid and filled with information that could have only been obtained through those being interviewed. Qualitative research through collective case studies does not use measurement, rather it uses the meaning of relationships.

The findings of the research will be provided in the following chapter. The chapter will highlight the information gathered from participant interviews and data analysis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

I utilized a collective case study approach within qualitative research methodology to examine the experiences of high school principals in the rural North Carolina who implement zero-tolerance policies. The purpose of this study was to describe how zero-tolerance policies impact the school-to-prison pipeline. During the research process, eight principals were able to vocalize their experience of using zero-tolerance policies and discuss the ways that these disciplinary practices have impacted the students on their campuses. First, I will provide background and demographic information of the participants. Then, the over-arching themes of the interview will be discussed relating to the use of zero-tolerance policies. Finally, the county achievement and disciplinary data of each principal interviewed will be analyzed to explore the impacts of zero-tolerance policy use on achievement gaps and racial disparities in school discipline and achievement data.

Participant Profiles

To ensure data saturation, eight principals in rural areas of the North Carolina participated in this qualitative collective case study. Guidance suggests that a framework including five to 20 participants is acceptable in a qualitative collective case study (Dworkin, 2012). Throughout the eight interviews, I collected sufficient data to draw the necessary conclusions for the research. To ensure the anonymity of participants, the participant names used are pseudonyms. District names are also anonymous as districts are coded by letter.

Mr. Albert

Mr. Albert leads a high school in District A. He identifies as a Black male. Mr. Albert became an educator a little later than most. After choosing to go directly into a trade job after high school, he did not complete college until he was almost 30. He moved into the

administrative role relatively quickly after only three years in the classroom. When discussing the most important part of his job, Mr. Albert discusses his need for education and learning. “I love to learn. I love history and it is my way of being able to share with other people” (Albert, personal communication, March 1, 2024).

Mr. Albert uses zero-tolerance policies when disciplining offenses regarding drugs, weapons, and fighting. The zero-tolerance policies are mandated by his district. He has a School Resource Officer who is purposefully hired and assigned to his campus by the Sheriff’s Department.

Ms. Bell

Ms. Bell is the principal of a high school in District B. She identifies as a White female. Ms. Bell is new in administration with two years of administrative experience. She went directly from being a teacher to a principal with only an internship as an assistant principal. She was able to perform her internship duties concurrently with her last year of teaching. When asked about the most important aspect of her job, Ms. Bell explains that her priority is her students.

I’d say the most important is the students. So many come from hard lives at home, and it is just sad to watch, right? But I also hold my teachers as an important part too. So many are quitting and feel unseen and unthanked” (Bell, personal communication, March 4, 2024).

Zero-tolerance policies are used for discipline in District B when weapons or drugs are involved in the offense. Ms. Bell is assigned a School Resource Officer for her campus by the Sheriff’s Department for the entirety of the school year. This officer is named each year at the start of school.

Mr. Cardinal

Mr. Cardinal is the principal of a high school in District C. He identifies as a White male. He has been in education for over 20 years with seven years in administration. Mr. Cardinal started his career in education as a teaching assistant. Continuing his education allowed him to work as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Mr. Cardinal feels that the most significant part of his job is safety. He explains, “The most important part of my job is keeping school safe. Of course, educating my students is especially important, but I need my students and my faculty safe for that to happen” (Cardinal, personal communication, March 8, 2024).

District C requires Mr. Cardinal to enforce zero-tolerance policies for offenses involving drugs, weapons, fighting, truancy, and classroom disruption. There is a School Resource Officer assigned to his high school by the Sheriff’s Department where it is a continuous role unless there is a duty change by the Sheriff.

Mr. Dean

Mr. Dean also works in District C where he has been a principal for four years. He identifies as a Black male. He has been in education for 10 years after working in the business field. Mr. Dean comes from a family of educators and decided on a second career in education to meet the needs and goals that he had set for himself. Mr. Dean focuses on personal communication with students as the most important aspect of his day. “I think what’s important is just learning student names and saying hello to everyone every day. That one thing can change a kid’s day (Dean, personal communication, April 3, 2024).

Mr. Dean uses the zero-tolerance policies for disciplining carrying and/or use of weapons, fighting, truancy, and classroom disruption violations as expected by his district. Mr.

Dean has a School Resource Officer assigned as a continuous duty for the officer after hire by the Sheriff.

Mr. Engle

Mr. Engle works in District D where he has been a principal for five years. Mr. Engle identifies as a White male. After college, he used his degree to enter education as a teacher working under a lateral entry license. After obtaining his teaching license, he quickly decided to continue his education to allow him to move up in the ranks of the education system. He finds the most important part of his workday to be making sure students are behaved and learning. “You know, teaching them respect and things that get them through life are just as important as English and Math” (Engle, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

Zero-tolerance policy infractions that Mr. Engle’s must use include weapons, drugs, fighting, and gang affiliation offenses. Mr. Engle shares the School Resource Officer assigned to his school with the elementary school which is on the same road within five miles. A schedule is set for the use of the School Resource Officer, and he can be at either location within minutes in collective case of an emergency.

Ms. Farr

Ms. Farr works in District E where this is her first year as principal and has five years of experience as an assistant principal. She has been in education for nearly 15 years. Ms. Farr identifies as a Black female. She feels the most important aspect of her job is her kids. Ms. Farr explains, “My kids... All of them... They are all so different, but they mean so much to me. They make me a better person” (Farr, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Ms. Farr and her district uses zero-tolerance policy discipline when offenses occur involving drugs, weapons, or fighting. She is assigned a School Resource Officer to her campus yearly by the county Sheriff's Department.

Mr. Gade

Mr. Gade works in District F where he has been a principal for about six years. He has a total of 11 years in administration and 20 years in education. Mr. Gade identifies as a White male. He feels that being aware of his leadership and job duties is the most important aspect of his job. Mr. Gade explains,

You know we take for granted what it means to lead a building. I sometimes just look at the number of people that walk through that door that I am in charge of learning and working and being safe, you know. It is a hard job but it's a gift (Gade, personal communication, April 10, 2024).

Zero-tolerance policy discipline is used by Mr. Gade and his district when weapons, drugs, gang, or fighting offenses occur. He is assigned a School Resource Officer by the Sheriff's Department which is continued from year to year unless there is promotion or resignation of the officer.

Mr. Hoke

Mr. Hoke works in District E where he has been a principal for 12 years and has 30 years in education. Mr. Hoke identifies as a Black male. Mr. Hoke reflected that the most important part of his work is everything. He explained,

Every single thing. That's what's important when you have this job. I think that is what people do not know about good people in education. Everything is important to us and if

everything doesn't work together, it falls to pieces (Hoke, personal communication, April 10, 2024).

Mr. Hoke uses zero-tolerance policy discipline when offenses occur regarding drugs, weapons, or fighting. He is assigned a School Resource Officer each year by the Sheriff's Department

Table 0.1

Summary of Participant Characteristics

	District	Years' Experience	Race	Gender
Mr. Albert	A	10	Black	M
Ms. Bell	B	8	White	F
Mr. Cardinal	C	20	White	M
Mr. Dean	C	10	Black	M
Mr. Engle	D	14	White	M
Ms. Farr	E	15	Black	F
Mr. Gade	F	20	White	M
Mr. Hoke	E	30	Black	M

Rural North Carolina County Data

Academic achievement and discipline data of each participant's district were analyzed to understand their correlation with the school-to-prison pipeline. Demographic disparities, academic disparities, and discipline disparities of each district were collected from the North Carolina School Report Card and The Southern Coalition for Social Justice. Using these documents, a better understanding of context with the use of zero-tolerance policies and the impact on the school-to-prison pipeline emerged.

District A

The 2022-2023 district profile for District A lists 11 schools with only two high schools. The average number of students in each high school is 210. Each high school has one principal and one assistant principal to serve the student population. The high schools in District A are labeled as low performing. At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, 11% of high school students were considered college and career ready on End-Of-Course Exams. The graduation rate for District A is 78%.

In District A, Black students are one and a half times more likely than white students to receive a suspension. Moreover, nearly 15 percent of all juvenile complaints in the county were school based. The entirety of the juvenile complaints referred to the sheriff's department from schools were Black students.

Table 0.2

Summary of Racial Demographics of District A

	American Indian	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Percentage of Students	0	0	50	5	42	3

National Center for Education Statistics (2024, July 27).

District B

District B had 25 schools with five high schools during the 2022-2023 school year. Each high school averaged a little over 450 students. All of the high schools have a principal and two assistant principals except for one that is ran by only the principal. There are no high schools in District B labeled low performing. Of high school students, 29.5% are considered college and career ready based on End of Course Exams. The graduation rate for District B is 83%.

Black students are three times more likely than white students to receive suspension in District B. Further, over 18% of all juvenile delinquency complaints in the county were school related. Black students made up 82% of the students referred to the county authorities.

Table 0.3

Summary of Racial Demographics of District B

	American Indian	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Percentage of Students	0	1	40	7	47	5

National Center for Education Statistics (2024, July 27).

District C

The 2022-2023 district profile for District C named 30 schools with seven high schools. The average number of students in each high school is 200. Most of the high schools have a principal with two or three assistant principals. One high school has only one principal due to its unique setting. There are three high schools in District C that are considered low performing. Of high school students, 20 percent are determined to be college and career ready on End of Course Exams. The graduation rate for District C is 85 percent.

In District C, Black students are three times more likely than White students to receive a suspension. In addition, 15 percent of all juvenile delinquency complaints in the county were school related. Of those complaints, 75 percent involved Black students.

Table 0.4

Summary of Racial Demographics of District C

	American Indian	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Percentage of Students	0	1	47	9	40	3

National Center for Education Statistics (2024, July 27).

District D

District D was comprised of 33 schools with 10 high schools in the 2022-2023 school year. The average number of students in each high school was just over 650. All of the high schools have one principal with two assistant principals. Seven of the 10 high schools were considered low performing with 20 percent of students considered college and career ready after End of Course Exams. The graduation rate for District D is 78 percent.

Black students were four times more likely than White students to receive a suspension in District D. Nearly 26 percent of all juvenile delinquency complaints in the county were school related. Of those complaints, 89 percent were in regard to Black students.

Table 0.5

Summary of Racial Demographics of District D

	American Indian	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Percentage of Students	0	1	31	13	53	2

National Center for Education Statistics (2024, July 27).

District E

The 2022-2023 district profile for District E lists 38 schools with eight high schools. The average number of students in each high school is about 900. All of the high schools have a principal with two or three assistant principals. One high school in District E were considered low performing with 35 percent of students determined to be college and career ready according to End of Course Exams. The graduation rate for District E is 82 percent.

In District E, Black students were five times more likely than White students to receive a suspension. Nearly 39 percent of all juvenile delinquency complaints in the county were school related. Black students made up 83 percent of the school-based complaints.

Table 0.6*Summary of Racial Demographics of District E*

	American Indian	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Percentage of Students	0	1	40	8	47	4

National Center for Education Statistics (2024, July 27).

District F

The district profile for District F names nine schools with one high school in the 2022-2023 school year. There were nearly 600 students in the high school. The high school had a principal with two assistant principals. The high school was considered low performing with 11 percent of students scoring college and career ready on End of Course Exams. The graduation rate for district F is 86 percent.

Black students were nearly four times more likely than White students to receive a short-term suspension. Moreover, nearly 55 percent of all juvenile delinquency complaints in the county were school related. Black students made up 90 percent of the school-based complaints.

Table 0.7*Summary of Racial Demographics of District F*

	American Indian	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Percentage of Students	1	1	48	10	38	2

National Center for Education Statistics (2024, July 27).

District Characteristics Summary

High schools in the five districts varied in population from a 200 to 900 students. The percent identified as college and career varied over 20 percentage points with the highest being only 35 percent. Graduation rates were also varied with all being over 75 percent. Table 4.8 illustrates the characteristics of each district.

Table 0.8

Summary of District Characteristics

District	High School Population	Percent College/Career Ready	Graduation Rate
A	210	11	78
B	450	29.5	83
C	200	20	85
D	650	20	78
E	900	35	82
F	600	11	86

Findings

The findings from this collective case study are organized into two distinct categories: data analysis of the interviews and document analysis of the discipline statistics and academic achievement by race for each principal's county. First, I will explain how themes were identified. The three themes found from principal interviews are explained next. The third section will discuss education equity in each county. Finally, a summary of the information gained through the collective case study is provided at the end of this section.

This chapter contains the findings of the research conducted to answer the following questions:

1. How do rural high school principals feel about zero-tolerance policies?
2. What are the experiences of rural high school principals when applying zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural school districts?
 - a. How do rural principals feel about the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline in rural schools?

3. How do exclusionary discipline policies and practices such as suspension and expulsion contribute to achievement gaps and racial disparities in school discipline?

Identifying Themes

In this qualitative collective case study, themes from interviews with principals were deciphered through a systematic process. The first step was to transcribe the data. I had to first familiarize myself with the data. Going through the data multiple times allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the conversations in each interview. The next step was to generate initial codes. I identified and tagged words and phrases to capture specific feelings, events or patterns. I then grouped related codes into categories to identify significant themes from the interviews.

In order to identify the themes from my research, I used repetition and data saturation. Bunch and Johnson (2006) explained that in qualitative research, a theme should be considered repetitious if it appeared in at least half of the interviews. For this study, there was a group of eight participants. In all collective cases, the themes appeared in at least 6 of the interviews. The first and second theme were seen in all eight interviews.

The research aimed to reach data saturation which indicates that you have gathered enough information to achieve understanding. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data saturation is the point at which no new themes or insights would emerge from additional data. This helped ensure that the identified themes are comprehensive and well-supported. This ensured that I had collected enough data to confidently draw conclusions and communicate the themes of the interviews.

Finding One: Zero-Tolerance Policies Criminalize Minor Infractions

The first theme formed from the analysis of principal interviews found that although participants felt that zero-tolerance policies were created to discipline fights, weapons, and

drugs, zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions that are relatively normal behaviors for children. Mr. Albert referenced multiple examples from working in high school and the use of zero-tolerance policies on young teenagers. He discussed a particular time when a student was expelled for having a pocketknife he had forgotten from hunting before school. “The knife was just there on accident but there is no discussion. The kid did that, so he is gone. Sometimes it feels warranted and sometimes it really upsets you to have to treat a kid that way, you know.” Many principals interviewed explained their understanding of weapons being brought on campus requiring suspension and expulsions to protect the safety and security of others. However, in those interviews, principals said other rule violations should have less rigid discipline.

Guns should be just immediate expulsion. Sometimes students bring things that they had before school or in a bag they used over the weekend and just didn’t think. I chalk it to being kids and that is things they get to have in their life away from school. Is it important and could cause harm? Yes. But is that what they were going to do with it? That’s what is never questioned.”

The interview with principals made clear that zero-tolerance policy discipline omits any discussion with the student. The ability to use rationalization with student intention is not allowed by administrators when executing punishment.

Principals that discipline with zero-tolerance policy suspension and expulsion following multiple classroom disruptions felt that the student suffered most due to the extensive instruction time missed. Mr. Dean explained, “I think that drugs and fights should be a little bit more lenient and definitely with less threatening behaviors like ongoing class disruption and things like that. In my experience, I have never seen it help the student.” In many collective cases, principals referenced class disruption being caused by gang affiliation paraphernalia and classified in that

way by teacher discipline referrals or direction given by county leadership. Mr. Engle questioned authority in the labeling of what is classified as gang material. “We have kids that wear rosaries because they got it when they were small in church, and we have some that wear them because of one of the gangs around. My problem is who am I to determine which is which and suspend the kid for it.” Mr. Gade also found it difficult to determine whether an item is gang-affiliated and if punishment must be administered.

Sometimes I just don't think it's my place. If it is not causing an issue and the student just has it, why do I have to implement something that the Sheriff's Department has told the school board is a gang sign? I'm not here to judge my students that way.

Participants also referenced the implications of suspensions and expulsions when using zero-tolerance as the discipline policy. Ms. Farr said “I think this is where the prison pipeline begins with zero-tolerance policies where everything that the student does is criminalized. So, this is what they become accustomed to, and they take that outside the classroom to society.” Criminalization of students in the classroom or on school campuses expands to student's home lives and their community. Criminalizing school infractions must be discussed when understanding the impact that zero-tolerance policies have on the school-to-prison pipeline.

In each interview, discipline with zero-tolerance policies was compared to criminalization. Mr. Hoke said, “Now what they have is a label. They are the criminals of the school. It never goes away and they can't learn when they can't come back to school.” When zero-tolerance policies are used to discipline minor infractions, educators must decide whether the discipline favors the student's or teacher's interest. Ms. Farr explained “It is hard for that story to not travel with the student especially when they were expelled for a year or so. It just is how teachers start seeing them.” Principals interviewed also expressed concerns as to whether

the student benefits from the suspension and learns more appropriate behaviors or if the removal of the student from the classroom is for the benefit of the teacher by ridding the distraction. Mr. Dean voiced, “I think it’s sometimes easier for them to just remove the student from the classroom than deal with the behavior and change it.” Principals acknowledge the learning loss incurred based on one suspension or expulsion can be overwhelming for a student. This loss multiplies if the student has more suspensions in the future. Mr. Albert affirmed, “You do something, then you’re gone. You can’t learn anything. There’s no chance with one shot and gone.” All principals interviewed made note that educators must be aware of the losses that students endure based on zero-tolerance policies when using them as a discipline tool. Moreover, they expressed the significance of the consequence of one bad decision as the deciding factor for a student and their academic career.

The majority of the participants referenced the detrimental effects that zero-tolerance policies can have on students and their future. Mr. Engle acknowledged that discipline of this nature does not address the root problem of the student’s behavior. He explained, “It is important for schools to consider the trauma and just normal life problems these kids go through. We never get down to the why and we can’t ever help the students get what they actually need.” Principals agreed that punitive punishment is not an answer to the underlying causes of student behavior.

Finding Two: Zero-Tolerance Policies Do Not Produce Equitable Outcomes for All Students

The second theme formed from analyzing the principal interviews concluded that zero-tolerance policies are not equitable for all students. All the principals interviewed expressed the belief that zero-tolerance policies affect students of color and those with disabilities at a much higher rate than White students. Mr. Gade expressed his understanding of using zero-tolerance policy discipline but recognized that the implication was not the same for all students. He

explained, “Our minority students are the most impacted. It does apply to all students, but we see it applied more to minority students and this is the situation we need to figure out.” Mr. Dean also explained the misrepresentation in data from his perception saying, “This impacts students that are Black and Brown and poor. That’s the reality of it.” Majority of those interviewed made note throughout their interview that marginalized and vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are those most impacted by the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. Principals see discipline data yearly and are aware that all students are not equally represented in the statistics. Mr. Cardinal explained, “I think I get why people wanted zero-tolerance policies theoretically but practically like anything that is too prescriptive, it can’t be implemented fairly and equitably. There are just too many black and brown students holding that data.”

The principals interviewed showed an understanding and the need for zero-tolerance policies, however, they also see that fair and equitable discipline cannot be reached for all students when circumstances are not taken into consideration. As Mr. Dean expressed in his interview, “In life in general, there are degrees to everything. We have to take the needs of the black and brown kids into account because we are missing something.” The principals acknowledged the importance of recognizing zero-tolerance policy discipline as not being equitable and the continuous overrepresentation of minority subgroups in the school discipline data. As Mr. Cardinal explained, “When consideration isn’t given to circumstances and consequences aren’t appropriate, the nature of zero-tolerance policies will not be fair. It won’t make schools safer or more orderly. In statistics, we see that it doesn’t reduce discipline infractions and it will disproportionately affect African American students.”

Building on the data illustrating that students of color were most often representative of minority students, the principals interviewed agreed that there is discrimination in zero-tolerance policy discipline. Ms. Bell explained, “The problem that makes it unfair for all students is that it is inherently discriminatory because students who are Black and Brown or disadvantaged are the ones who are punished less discreetly in a school system.” Many principals explained that it is somewhat expected that these situations are not publicized, and no discussion of the discipline action taken is allowed outside of the school building. Mr. Engle explained, “We are expected to keep our mouth shut when a student has to be suspended. We do not question it. Then our job is put in jeopardy.” Mr. Gade had the same experience with the expectation of no discussion and continued to explain that “It is completely unacceptable to discuss these things outside of school and definitely not with a parent. It’s hard to go anywhere when word gets out that there has been a weapon on campus or something of that nature.” Many principals felt that their job would be at risk if any information or opinion was communicated to others inside or outside of the school building.

While understanding that students are different and affected differently by zero-tolerance policies, interviews also explained areas of concern. The possibility of receiving an equitable education after suspension is also a disparity among subgroups. Mr. Gade explained, “This is another disparity that I’ve seen is that oftentimes the parents don’t understand the process of how to get the child enrolled into alternative schools, so they don’t ever make it there.” Processes for post-suspension and expulsion were labeled a need by those interviewed. Moreover, principals expanded that there was no opportunity for redemption given. Mr. Albert mentioned that there were no opportunities for students to make amends when no alternative education was possible for students. He stated, “The kids do not only lose education, but they never get the chance to

learn from their mistakes like kids need to do. We aren't allowed to address the problems they have. We just suspend them, and nothing is corrected." Ms. Bell also mentioned the need to address the reason for the behavior. She explained,

We punish to try to get a behavior to change and never look at why a student acts the way they do. These kids have suffered and have trauma just like us. But, because of how easy it is to suspend, we just get rid of them and never look at the whole child. Even though we spend a lot and I mean a lot of time in that type training.

Principals were consistent in interviews explaining that student circumstances are unique and should be disciplined in a more supportive manner based on their unique needs.

Not all students in North Carolina have an alternative educational opportunity in their county. This can create more learning loss as well as future educational impacts once the student can return to school. Mr. Hoke explained, "Students with special needs are more likely to receive an alternative educational opportunity due to federal and state laws that require they be served." There are many subgroups of students negatively affected by zero-tolerance policies with no equitable outcomes for students with known educational struggles. As Mr. Albert stated, "I don't believe zero-tolerance policies originated to target a specific group of students, but in practice, that's what's done." Principals explained that it is a constant challenge to implement policies that harm students based on color and disability.

Finding Three: School Resource Officers Determine the Climate of Safety and Stability at the School

The final theme formed from analyzing the principal interviews determined that school resource officers and their relationships with students play an integral role in the climate of the school. Principals expressed the need for an authority figure and the important support that can

be offered to students through the school resource officers. Mr. Engle explained, “My officer is just the best. He knows my kids. He eats with them and talks to them when they come in the building. There is less problem because my kids trust him if there is something to go wrong.” All of the principals interviewed expressed the importance of the school resource officer being available for the students as a mentor and adult that they can trust. Mr. Hoke characterized his school resource officer as loyal and friendly. He said, “Being able to get along with the students is so important for the officer. They just have to have this relationship with the kids like teachers. They have to show our kids they are real people, and they want the best for them.” Ms. Farr also expressed this same idea saying,

I have been a principal with good and bad officers. It makes the biggest difference.

Students interact with people that they can trust. It is on the cop sometimes to bridge the gap or get along with students. Then if things go bad, they are a person of trust not just someone there to arrest them.

It was common in the interview answers for principals to state that the officer may have to intervene at times and arrest a student and be seen as they enforce the law. However, the principals agreed that this display of authority should be shown while building relationships for the officer to be more respected and to keep the situations under control. Many of the principals expected their officers to act as school faculty. As Mr. Gade explained,

I want my officer to be just like my teachers. I do not allow mine to be used as a punisher. I want my kids to feel safe and learn that cops are there for you while also doing their job. Too many schools use the officer as the disciplinarian and that is not what the purpose is.

Many of the interview participants felt that school resource officers are often used as administrators for rule enforcement and discipline, however, that is not what their purpose on campus should be. As Mr. Engle said, “They should be a help and not the enforcement. It is up to me to discipline, and their job is to keep safety and intervene if I need them to.” All of the participants interviewed agreed that school resource officers should be on campus to ensure safety while letting discipline belong to school administrators.

Inadequate resources in public schools also contribute to the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline. Half of the principals interviewed expressed that they felt that there were ways to address student behavior before it reached the point of needing discipline which could include suspension or expulsion which agreed with the literature including resources for student success. For example, principals explained that they felt that the school resource officer position and funding could be better utilized to improve students academically and socially. Ms. Bell explained,

The school resource officers are a source of funding that could better help students. We could replace that school resource officer with a counselor or a psychologist on staff who can be in the school to provide the mental health piece. Giving students and their families this link to help in the school and community could be the way to guide students out of the current problems and issues that they suffer through and keep them from making horrific mistakes. Making mental health a priority could mitigate the underlying issues for students and eradicate the need for the use of zero-tolerance policy discipline.

Conclusion

Findings included in this collective case study give insight to the impact that zero-tolerance discipline policies have on the school-to-prison pipeline in rural North Carolina. Eight

high school principals from six rural districts in North Carolina were interviewed to learn more about their experiences with zero-tolerance discipline policies and their observations regarding the role of school resource officers within the high school. Participant profiles were included to provide readers with insight into how each principal perceived the application of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and its implications for the school-to-prison pipeline. District data was also analyzed concerning academic and discipline data of subgroups.

The findings and themes gained from these qualitative interviews emphasized how principals use zero-tolerance policy discipline and the impact that it has on students. Next, the analysis encompassed the overarching themes that surfaced regarding the principal's implementation of zero-tolerance policies and their implications for the school-to-prison pipeline. District academic and discipline profiles were incorporated and examined to gain deeper insights into how zero-tolerance policies impact equity among affected subgroups. In the next chapter, there is a comprehensive analysis of these findings and the relationship to existing literature, accompanied by a discussion of their implications for professional practice, policy, and future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study was designed to learn about the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline through the experiences of rural high school principals in North Carolina. This chapter contains a discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapter, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research. First, the findings presented in Chapter IV are summarized and dissected by the closest corresponding research question. I follow with an analysis of the conceptual framework intertwining the foundations of Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it was used to structure this study. The limitations and delimitations of the study are explained followed by implications for policy, practice, and future research. Concluding remarks will be provided to close the chapter.

Summary of Findings

This study intended to explore the impact rural high school principals in North Carolina believed zero-tolerance policies had on the school-to-prison pipeline through their unique experiences. The first finding of the study was zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions. Furthermore, the zero-tolerance policies created an entrance for students to the school-to-prison pipeline as students became criminal justice involved due to the infraction that occurred in school. The research found in the second finding that principals felt that students of color and students with disabilities are impacted at a higher rate making zero-tolerance policies not equitable for all students. The study also found that zero-tolerance policies, although mandatory to use, may negatively affect the relationships between students and the School Resource Officer. Finding three maintained that School Resource Officers determine the climate of safety and stability at the school. Rather than examining the underlying issues that contribute

to student misbehavior, this study shows that zero-tolerance policy discipline intensifies the rate at which students become criminalized and their likelihood to become criminal justice involved.

RQ 1 – How Do Rural High School Principals Feel About Zero-Tolerance Policies?

This study first examined the question: How do rural high school principals feel about zero-tolerance policies? In essence, the answer is very negatively. Principals were not involved in the creation of these discipline policies, however, were expected to be the sole implementers for the districts in which they work. District level leadership created mandatory zero-tolerance discipline policies to regulate student fights, bringing weapons to campus, and drug use and possession on school grounds. After the implementation of zero-tolerance policy discipline, principals interviewed unanimously agreed that these policies were necessary for safety and security of school campuses. However, principals also agreed that the use of these policies had criminalized minor infractions that could be dealt with on a collective case-by-collective case basis rather than with required suspensions and expulsions.

Principals felt that resolution with disciplinary practices should be flexible and handled by campus administration. They also explained that circumstances regarding specific student behavior should be substantive when determining the proper discipline to be executed when rules were broken. There was common agreement among principals that weapons on campus were understood to be a severe threat. However, the type of weapon and intended use should also contribute to the discipline administered.

Due to the varying zero-tolerance policies in each district, each principal had examples of the use of zero-tolerance discipline policies that negatively impacted students but were from insignificant student behavior. Many principals expressed their concern with suspension and expulsion due to age-appropriate activity of students. All principals noted that students were

expected to exhibit teenage behavior in high school. Moreover, they explained that in their roles, their expectation of behavior did not dictate suspension, expulsion, and loss of learning if they controlled their own discipline administration. Instead, principals explained that using first offenses as behavior lessons would be more beneficial to the student and the school. They continued to explain the importance of not criminalizing and labeling a student due to one bad decision. Not only was it prevalent that students would carry this label as they moved through high school, but the student's education loss also would be nearly irreversible. It was noted in many conversations that students would fall behind and give up once the suspension and expulsions occurred. This not only left them to drop out of school but left them with the possibility of becoming more criminal justice involved. The principals concurred that punitive measures and labeling are not solutions to the root causes of student behavior.

RQ 2 – What are the Experiences of High School Principals in North Carolina When Applying Zero-Tolerance Policy Discipline in Rural School Districts?

This study also investigated the question: What are the experiences of high school principals in North Carolina when applying zero-tolerance policy discipline in rural school districts? This question went further to examine: How do principals feel about the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline in rural schools? Participants in this study agreed that the application or impact of zero-tolerance policy discipline is not equitable for all students. Principals also agreed that it is imperative that the role of school resource officers be defined and limited to criminal activity on campus.

The consensus among all principals was that school resource officers and their connections with students play a crucial role in shaping the school climate. Participants explained that the relationships that the school resource officers built with the students kept

many zero-tolerance policy behaviors at bay. When students displayed behaviors that violated school policies, school resource officers that had built trust among the student body could relieve the situation quickly without further safety and security measures needed in the schools. Many principals felt that their school was a safer place due to having a respected school resource officer who was also deemed a member of the faculty and treated as such.

Participants that had both positive and negative experiences with their campus assigned school resource officers were adamant that the officers were a significant influence in the school. In many collective cases, respect and trust of the school resource officer determined the control of student behavior. Students relied on school resource officers as mentors and solution-oriented members of the faculty when presented with student conflict situations. Although many principals felt that the money used to ensure police presence in the school could be spent in therapeutic ways, they agreed that positive interactions with the officer's help ensure the safety of their school campuses and fewer violations of zero-tolerance policies.

Finally, principals consistently explained that each student's circumstances are unique, and discipline should be administered in a more supportive manner tailored to their individual needs. Principals felt that students are targeted due to race, disability or social class. Rather than give more assistance to those in need, principals felt that those already struggling should have received social and emotional education to deter negative behavior. Principals felt that treating the root cause of behavior could stop the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline.

RQ 3 – How do Exclusionary Discipline Policies and Practices Contribute to Achievement Gaps and Racial Disparities in School Discipline?

Finally, this study researched the question: How do exclusionary discipline policies and practices such as suspension and expulsion contribute to achievement gaps and racial disparities in school discipline? All the principals interviewed shared the view that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately impact students of color and those with disabilities compared to white students. A significant point made by principals in this study was the concrete discipline data that they verify and complete at the end of each school year draws awareness to the facts that all students are not proportionately represented statistically. They also emphasized that they were not permitted to challenge decisions regarding suspension or expulsion. Once a decision was made according to the district's policy, it was final and uncontested.

In all districts represented, Black students were more likely than white students to receive suspension. The highest college and career ready percentage depicted in the districts of interviewed principals was 35 percent. Many districts reported that only 11 to 20 percent of their students were considered college and career ready after End of Course Exams. The document analysis of the districts also noted that a significant proportion of the juvenile delinquency complaints in each district were school related. In the researched districts, over 75 percent of the complaints referred were Black students. The entirety of all juvenile complaints of one district were from school reported incidences. Due to the considerable number of student's criminal justice involved due to behaviors exhibited on school campuses, students struggle to receive proper education and fall further behind. Consequentially, these students affected are not represented in college and career ready statistics on End of Course Exams.

Principals also found the importance of alternative education due to the inability of the student to participate in conventional education practices when suspended and expelled due to zero-tolerance policy violations. Participants agreed that the availability of alternative education afforded students educational opportunities that kept them removed from further criminal activity. Due to labels attached at the time of suspension or expulsion when zero-tolerance policies were enforced, principals noted the enhanced possibility that students continue down a path of negative activity where they became further involved in the criminal justice system. Whether it be due to anger, fear, or lack of clear decision making and guidance, principals discussed that many students would involve themselves negative behaviors once school was not an option. Many students were said to continue down a path of criminal activity with time out of normal school activities. When suspended or expelled from school, many principals said that this also changed their social life as well. Due to labels of “criminal” and deemed a “bad influence,” the entire social sector for these students was affected. Students have not only lost their academic chances, but they have also lost many friends. Many principals observed that students subjected to zero-tolerance policy discipline often ended up on a path leading from school-to-prison.

Discussion of Findings

This study found that principals find that many of the literature’s findings are relevant to their daily experiences on their campuses in rural North Carolina. Participants named many of the impacts of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline that were identified in previous studies and relevant literature. While the use of zero-tolerance policies has changed over time, the consequences of the disciplinary on student success. The study’s findings underscore the profound influence of zero-tolerance policies on exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline.

There were very many similarities between my research and previous research outlined in the literature review. The principals that were interviewed agreed that school security is a top priority. However, as existing literature states, principals also explained that zero-tolerance policies do not manifest as remedy for improving school safety or academic achievement (Annamma, 2014; Annamma et al., 2014; Bogale, 2016). Existing literature and this study also recognize that minority representation is intensified with the use of zero-tolerance policy discipline on minor infractions. Overwhelmingly, principals agreed with past research regarding the harmful effects of zero-tolerance policies and the negative impact continued concerning marginalized student populations and the force of students into the criminal justice system.

The role of School Resource Officers in the school held a slight discrepancy between this research and existing literature. Although existing literature showed that there was a need for police presence on campus (Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba, 2000), this research found that there is a significant impact on the school based on the relationships built with students by the School Resource Officer. Principals in this research stated that School Resource Officers should be available on campus as a trusted adult for students. Principals also felt that trust must exist between the students and the officer for there to be enhancement of school climate and safety of the school.

Criminalizing Students Contributes to the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Participants in this study agreed that zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions. They included escalation of minor misconduct that negatively impacted educational outcomes. The principals noted that among academic effects, students also suffered social and criminal effects that were fostered by the administration of zero-tolerance policy discipline. Principals explained that the use of zero-tolerance policies often resulted in rigid disciplinary

actions for infractions that could have been addressed with consequences for the unique circumstances of the student. Instead, zero-tolerance policy discipline mandated predetermined suspension or expulsion for specific offenses regardless of context.

Principals explained that zero-tolerance policies criminalize behaviors that are often developmentally typical for adolescents in high school. Offenses that cause minor disruptions can lead to severe punishments rather than treatment of the specific behavior. Principals felt that this criminalization did not address the root cause of the policy violation and instead pushed students out of the classroom and into the school-to-prison pipeline.

The punitive nature of zero-tolerance policies was found to disrupt student educational trajectories and lead to decreased academic achievement and increased dropout rates. Participants noted that when students were removed from their normal educational setting, they missed critical instruction which led to poor academic performance. In districts where alternative education was not possible, students were left with no choice but to be excluded from any form of academic environment for periods of one year or longer. The negative impact of this educational outcome caused students to drift further into criminal activity intensifying the school-to-prison pipeline.

Harsh disciplinary procedures as practiced with zero-tolerance policies caused a stigma to be associated with the student. Principals explained that students being labeled from suspension or expulsion led to students being alienated and disengaging from the school community. If students were allowed to return, the negative connotation of being a troublemaker moved through their high school career with them never allowing them to escape their past mistake. This theme from the research findings is consistent with findings in current and past literature. Mendel (2021) explained, “Zero-tolerance policies have led to the criminalization of minor

infractions, disproportionately affecting students of color and contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.” Existing literature and principals interviewed agree that zero-tolerance policies can have severe consequences for students when disciplinary issues are treated as criminal behavior. Principals concurred that the educational future was bleak for students who were disciplined with zero-tolerance policy discipline.

Achievement Gaps and Racial Disparities

Principals in this study unanimously agreed that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect students of color, students with disabilities, and other marginalized subgroups. When discussing this topic, participants explained that discipline required of zero-tolerance policies were applied unevenly which was seen among racial and low socioeconomic subgroups in discipline statistics. Principals acknowledged the need to maintain a safe school environment for students and staff. However, many focused on the desire to support and rehabilitate their students rather than solely punishing them. They felt that the need for support staff and the social and emotional guidance that could be provided was negligently overlooked when preparing district budgets.

When discussing the statistics of applied zero-tolerance policy discipline, principals expressed the heightened concern of the policies not being equitable for all students. Principals did not agree with the prescriptive nature of zero-tolerance policies, or the biases reflected from the data. Many were disturbed with the systemic racism that they felt these policies represent in educational institutions. Many participants in this research felt that they were implementing discipline that contributed to racial discrimination in their school, district, and communities. They felt heavy opposition to the racial disparity and their own personal beliefs that conflicted with mandated policies. The feelings of the principals agree with existing literature on the topic.

Henry and colleagues (2021) reported, “Zero-tolerance policies are inherently inequitable, disproportionately affecting students of color and exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 8). The consensus of the literature and principals is that the impact of zero-tolerance policies on all students must be recognized for education and discipline to be equitable for all students. This theme generally agreed with previous literature regarding zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Principals also included socioeconomic disadvantaged students when discussing their experiences. They explained that low-income students were disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance policies. Stressors from family economic hardship can influence behavior. However, principals felt that the use of zero-tolerance policies did not consider the context of the student behavior. The suspensions and expulsions allocated to low socioeconomic students can lead to even fewer opportunities for education and employment.

Participants also spoke to the fact that their job would be put in jeopardy if there was any question of discipline disparities to upper district leadership. They noted the expectation that consequences should be delivered without probing alternate discipline. The possibility of their job being at risk hindered principals from defending or supporting students who had violated school rules. Principals felt that students were not afforded the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Moreover, they explained that suspension occurred, and education and behavior needs suffered. These circumstances highlighted the complex role principals hold when navigating the challenges and implications of zero-tolerance policies.

The School Resource Officer Maintains the Climate, Safety, and Security of the School

Principals concurred that student behavior requiring zero-tolerance policy discipline declined when there was a climate of stability and trust on the school campus. Strategies used by

faculty to gain student trust were instrumental in lower discipline infractions. Principals also agreed that the presence and actions of School Resource Officers were significant in the overall environment and perception of the school. School Resource Officers are often tasked with maintaining order and the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies. However, the participants felt that discipline authority should be shown through school administration with School Resource Officers used if criminal activity had occurred. The finding of theme three generally agrees with past literature regarding school resource officers and the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. Brushaber-Drockon (2022) explained,

Rural school administrators often perceive zero-tolerance policies as necessary for maintaining safety, yet there is a growing recognition that these policies, particularly when enforced by school resource officers, may not effectively address underlying issues and can contribute to an atmosphere of fear and criminalization among students (p. 171).

The principals interviewed recognized that policy must be followed to keep students and faculty safe, however, they agree with the literature in that the underlying issues are not handled which would deter the behavior.

Principals were unwavering in their belief that School Resource Officers should be treated as faculty and should work with students in the same fashion. Rather than School Resource Officers creating an atmosphere of surveillance and punishment, the principals interviewed expected them to build positive relationships with students. Principals felt that School Resource Officers should not be heavily involved in disciplinary actions. Due to possible negative interactions that students had witnessed in their communities with the police, principals did not want to exacerbate these fears. Principals found that ensuring School Resource Officers

contributed to a positive school climate was dependent upon not focusing primarily on law enforcement but the relationships with the students.

The lack of mental health resources was discussed when answering interview questions regarding the School Resource Officer. Over half of principals interviewed had witnessed negative interactions between the officer and students in the school. Due to these situations, principals expressed that the need for mental health resources was significant. They felt that these resources would better serve students especially if the School Resource Officers created tension on campus. Although acknowledging the need for police presence in schools, many principals explained that counselors would assist in preventing behaviors through understanding the needs of the student which they felt would lessen the need for police presence on school campuses.

An Evaluation of the Conceptual Framework: An Intersection of Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory

The Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory are powerful frameworks used to understand societal dynamics. The societal dynamics of focus that led this study were crime, deviance, and race. The Labeling Theory explores how self-identity can influence behavior by the words used to classify them. Critical Race Theory examines the role of racism and inequalities in society. Tannenbaum stated, “The process of making the criminal is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that are complained of” (p. 20). In many collective cases, zero-tolerance policies earmark particular sets of students based on race and label them as deviant. In this study, the two theories

intersected to apply understanding of how labels and the dynamics of race have promoted zero-tolerance policy discipline contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

The Labeling Theory is a sociological perspective that explores that deviance is the result of societal labels. Central to this theory, is the idea that a person accepts the label imposed on them and it becomes part of their identity. As Becker (1963) explained, “Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders” (p. 8). This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy where the labeled individual behaves in such a way that the deviant label is fulfilled. In this study, I focused on districts that had implemented a zero-tolerance policy. I collected data from principal interviews and district data to understand how criminalizing student actions created deviance that was not inherent, but rather the result of societal labels. This research sought to find how stigmatization whether because of race or academic achievement resulted in deviance due to society expectations.

Critical Race Theory is a framework that analyzes the role of racism in an individual’s life. Critical Race Theory implores that racism is not secular to an individual, rather it is embedded in legal systems and policies compounding the experiences of oppression. Matsuda (1993) voiced, “Those who are oppressed by racial discrimination have the clearest view of the system of oppression and the strongest basis for demanding a restructuring of the hierarchy of society” (p. 41). Critical Race Theory examines how policies and laws contribute to racial inequality. As these policies and laws are implemented, inequities are shown among races and minorities suffer.

The intertwining of Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory illustrate how race and societal labels unite to magnify the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the school-to-prison

pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies criminalize specific discipline infractions and lead to students becoming criminal justice involved. Labeling Theory explains that students behave according to the labels that are placed upon them at the time they portrayed negative behavior while Critical Race Theory highlights racial disparities when policy discipline is applied.

The labeling of Black students as deviant aligns with Critical Race Theory's focus on systemic racism. Racial stereotypes and societal biases are exposed through student's suspension and expulsion data. Black students are affected at a much higher rate than White students. Students affected are more likely to lag in academic progress and increase their chances of being further criminalized. Stefancic (2001) remarked, "Critical Race Theory is a movement that is both academic and activist, dedicated to studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 2). This cycle of disadvantage is particularly damaging for marginalized subgroups.

By integrating the insights of Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory, the focus of supportive interventions and avoiding stigmatizing labels is noteworthy. Both theories must be analyzed together to understand the impact of equitable disciplinary practices and systemic biases. By integrating the Labeling Theory and Critical Race Theory, it is apparent that by categorizing students based on negative behavior, racial inequalities are perpetuated contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Limitations and Delimitations

Efforts were made to ensure the reliability and validity of this research. However, it is not without its limitations. As explained by Cresswell and Clark (2011), researchers understand limitations to represent possible weaknesses in a research design, outside the realm of their control, that could influence outcomes and conclusions. Although there was a diverse group of

principals interviewed, there were varying degrees in knowledge and experience with zero tolerance policy discipline. Finding participants with a wealth of knowledge was challenging due to the versatile utilization of zero-tolerance policies. Securing principals for interviews with a wealth of knowledge and experience was difficult with principal turnover and promotion in leadership in small rural counties. Principals experience can widely vary between schools and districts. Schools size, location, and demographics can create challenges in identifying common themes.

A final limitation was limited data available from each district regarding academic achievement by subgroup. Achievement data post COVID-19 was used. Zero-tolerance policy discipline may be only one of the contributing factors to inadequate student achievement. A snapshot of data makes it difficult to determine the deficiencies of students and all reasons for low percentages of academically successful students.

Delimitations are described by Creswell (2000) as specific boundaries set to narrow the focus of the research. Two delimitations exist that could impact the outcome of the study. The first delimitation is not interviewing parents and students. The primary focus was on the experience of the principals. Research in the future should include examination of the experiences of parents and students when disciplined with zero-tolerance policy consequences. A second delimitation of the study of this research included only interviewing principals confined to regions and schools in rural North Carolina.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

This collective case study has important implications for policymakers, educators, and advocates working to address the school-to-prison pipeline and promoting racial equity in schools. Zero-tolerance policies are commonly implemented in school systems to address

specific behaviors swiftly and strictly. While the intent is often to maintain safety, these policies lead to the criminalization of students due to their rigid enforcement. By highlighting the negative impacts of zero-tolerance policies, this study will inform efforts to reform disciplinary practices and create a more just and equitable school system for all students.

Prevent and Change Behavior

One major topic to expand from the research is the importance of creating a favorable school climate to prevent and change inappropriate student behavior. Social and emotional learning, restorative practices, mentors, and counselors should be an addition to school staff and curriculum to meet the mental health needs of students. Being proactive in handling unacceptable behavior while finding the catalyst for the behavior will be the beginning of ensuring that all students stay in school to learn and work toward closing achievement gaps.

Implementing restorative justice practices can redirect attention from punishment to addressing the underlying cause of the behavior. Through restorative justice practices, those directly affected by experiences come together to discuss the impact, find solutions, and prevent future incidents. Restorative justice practices will also shift punitive discipline measure to restorative action plans that address the root cause of student behavior. To change behaviors, new behaviors and methods of coping must be explored and implemented. Approaching students with strategies that allow students to remain in school and learn from their mistakes fosters strong relationship and a more positive school climate.

Social and emotional learning curricula should be administered through school guidance counselors and teachers to ensure that students are equipped with the emotional intelligence they need to navigate underlying emotional and behavioral issues that contribute to academic deficiency. Developing and regulating emotions effectively can improve student self-awareness

and decrease impulsive behaviors that lead to suspension, expulsion, and eventually the criminal justice system. Social awareness and positive behavior education help students develop cooperation and conflict resolution that will benefit them at school and in society. Furthermore, increased positive behavior responses will decrease suspensions and increase academic growth and proficiency.

Discipline Policy Expectations and Consequences

Strategies put in place as disciplinary policies must not be established and forgotten. Once implemented, disciplinary policies and practices should be evaluated with goals set to improve with student needs. The goal plans should also be reevaluated. Data must be understood to make future changes that create equitable outcomes for all subgroups of students. In addition, training should be provided and, in some collective cases, mandated to improve the implementation of the expected discipline outcomes.

Policies should ensure that consequences are proportional to the offense committed while also considering the individual circumstances of the student. Clear guidelines for disciplinary actions are required alongside alternative discipline to punitive measures. Regular training and workshops should be held to ensure that educators are prepared to discuss expectations regularly with students. It is essential for schools to review and revise discipline policies to ensure alignment with best practices. Best practices should involve measures of early intervention and prevention programs. To understand diverse perspectives, policy revision should include all stakeholders to incorporate diverse perspectives and to ensure that policies reflect the needs of all students. Through clear communication, consistent enforcement, and inclusive integration, disciplinary policies will not be forgotten and to guarantee long-term effectiveness.

Alternative supports and disciplinary measures keep students engaged in learning and connected to supportive resources while addressing the negative behavior. By implementing these implications for policy and practice, schools can establish a more inclusive disciplinary system that encourages positive behavior, mitigates the school-to-prison pipeline and fosters the overall well-being and academic achievement of all students.

Practices to Ensure Equity

Ensuring equity in policies and practices related to zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline is crucial to address disparities and promote an equitable and nurturing educational environment. Equity focused discipline practices should be enacted to monitor the effectiveness of strategies in improving student achievement across all subgroups. To ensure the effectiveness of equity focused discipline practices, ongoing professional development for educators should be expected. Trainings focused on restorative justices, de-escalation techniques and equitable discipline practices enhance the educators' ability to create a safe and inclusive learning environment.

In addition to equity focused discipline practices, investing in social-emotional learning programs and mental health supports assists in tackling the underlying causes of student behavior issues. Schools can promote positive behavior with fewer discipline infractions by equipping students with the skills needed to be self-aware and make responsible decisions. By prioritizing equity in policies and practices, these strategies combine to create an inclusive environment for all students to have the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed.

Future Research

This study provided valuable insight into how zero-tolerance policies affect the school-to-prison pipeline in rural North Carolina. Further research should be conducted to continue to

monitor trends in strategies to prevent the flow of students into prison from schools. The use of zero tolerance policy discipline may change and the impact of student success should be investigated. Future versions of this study should be completed using data from various regions in North Carolina and the United States. This includes data representative of both rural and urban areas.

Majority of the principals interviewed in this research disclosed that males were often most impacted by suspensions and expulsions. It would be beneficial for those responsible for policy change to understand the impact zero-tolerance policies have on the male population. As well as contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline, zero tolerance policies create psychological impacts that create distrust toward law enforcement and other institutions of society. A more thorough understanding of the academic, social, and psychological impact of zero-tolerance policies on the male sub-group would illustrate the need for reform to reduce the negative impact of zero-tolerance policy discipline on the school-to-prison pipeline.

An additional recommendation for further research would be to include students and parents in the interview process. In many collective cases, students and parent could give more definitive answers as to the effect of zero-tolerance policies on the future of the student. Further, conducting longitudinal studies to track the effects of zero-tolerance policies and the combined effect on student outcomes and engagement with the justice system would be beneficial. This research can help assess the lasting impacts of punitive disciplinary practices on students' lives. By advancing research in these areas, scholars can provide evidence-based data and recommendations to further inform effective policymaking and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

Conclusion

This study aimed to learn about the impact of zero-tolerance discipline policies on the school-to-prison pipeline through the experiences of rural high school principals tasked with implementing this specific protocol. This research used a qualitative collective case study design which included interviews with eight teachers in from different rural high schools in North Carolina. Analysis of achievement and discipline data from each principal's district was also included and discussed.

Participants in this study felt that principals recognize that minority students and students with disabilities are affected more frequently, however, the implementation is district directed and must continue. The study also found that the use of zero-tolerance policy discipline could potentially strain the relationships between students and faculty. Rather than examining the underlying issues that contribute to student misbehavior, this study shows that zero-tolerance policy discipline intensifies the rate at which students become criminalized which escalates the likelihood of the student to become criminal justice involved. Principals also reported that the School Resource Officers significantly contribute to the climate of the school while also maintaining the safety and security on campus.

All students, regardless of race or disability, should be afforded equitable educational opportunities. Failure to meet the educational needs of students increases because of the use of zero-tolerance policies when disciplining students. Principals revealed that they understand the implications of using zero-tolerance policies, but they are instructed to use them regardless of circumstance. The use of zero-tolerance policies and the complications involved were described during the interview process. Implementing zero-tolerance policies has been shown to push

students out of school and into the criminal justice system while decreasing their ability to live a successful life and be productive in society.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Study: Disciplining Students or Creating Prisoners: An Exploratory Collective case Study on the Impact of Zero Tolerance Policies on the School to Prison Pipeline from the Perspective of Rural High School Principals in Northeastern North Carolina

IRB Protocol 26528

Principal Investigator(s): Candice Murtagh, chmontag@ncsu.edu, (919)274-5323

Funding Source: None

NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Lisa Bass, lrbass@ncsu.edu, phone: (919)515-6291

You are invited to take part in a research study. Here are some important things to know:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate and change your mind, you can stop participating at any time without penalty.
- The purpose of this research study is to understand the impact of zero tolerance policy discipline on the school to prison pipeline from high school administrators in rural Northeastern North Carolina.
- You will be asked to participate in a face to face interview that will last for approximately one hour. During this interview, the researcher will ask you questions regarding your use of zero tolerance policy discipline and your observations of its use.
- You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies may pose risks to those who participate.
- You may want to participate in this research because too many students are entering the criminal justice system at growing rates. You may not want to participate in this research because you do not use zero tolerance policy discipline.
- If you have questions about your participation in this research at any time, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office via email at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1-919-515-8754

Please read the rest of this consent form for more specific details of this research. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of the study is to better understand the perspectives and experiences of rural high school administrators when implementing zero tolerance policy discipline in Northeastern North Carolina.

How many people will be in the study?

There will be approximately eight participants in this study.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and be a principal in rural Northeastern North Carolina who utilizes zero tolerance policy discipline.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. Choose a time and date for a face to face interview.
2. Participate in a one hour interview regarding your implementation of zero tolerance discipline policies.
3. You will be provided a copy of your research data so that you can confirm the accuracy of the information collected. You can indicate if there's any information or identifiers you want us to delete or not share.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is one to two hours.

Recording in research

Participants will be audio recorded.

We would like to use these recordings for transcription only. We will keep these recordings indefinitely.

Benefits to participating in this research

The direct benefits to you as a result of your participation in this research include: providing your knowledge and experiences to understand the impact of zero tolerance policy discipline on the school to prison pipeline in rural Northeastern North Carolina.

What data will be collected about me and are there risks associated with that?

The data that are collected about you include your personal and educational background. The risks to you as a result of collecting this information include no identifiable risk. These risks will be mitigated through implementing data protections in accordance with NC State data protection standards.

How will my identity and the data about me be stored and protected?

After all data is collected, the researchers will go through the data and remove all direct and indirect identifiers so that the dataset can no longer be connected to your identity.

We will go through the transcripts and do our best to remove or replace any information that can identify you directly. Examples of the information we will remove are school name, your position, and personal data that identifies you. After we do this, it is unlikely your identity could be deduced from your responses.

Your data will not be used or shared for future research studies. We will delete your data after the regulations indicate at least 3 years.

How will the data about me be reported to the public and are there risks associated with that?

We may quote you or share specific responses from you in our publications and presentations but we will not include your name or any other information that could easily identify you. As a result, there are minimal risks to you as a result of how we report the data.

Right to withdraw your participation

Your participation is voluntary. Even if you agree initially, consent is an ongoing process. You can stop participating at any time for any reason. To do so, tell the researcher implementing the intervention that you withdraw. You can also contact the researcher, Candice Murtagh at chmurtagh@ncsu.edu and (919) 274-5323. Or you can contact the faculty advisor for this research, Lisa Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu and (919)515-6291.

If you withdraw, we will stop any procedures or data collection that may be happening. We will also delete any data that's already been collected from you whenever possible. We will not be able to delete your data if we cannot identify which responses are yours or if the data has already been published.

Compensation

For your participation in this study, you will receive a \$20 gift card. If you withdraw from the study before it ends, you will waive your compensation.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the student researcher, Candice Murtagh, at chmontag@ncsu.edu and (919)274-5323. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Lisa Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu and (919)515-6291.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or [fill out a confidential form online](https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/) at <https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/>

Consent to participate

By signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. If I consent to participate, I understand that I can stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

Yes, I want to be in this research study.

Name _____ Today's Date

No, I do not want to be in this research study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your current position. How long have you been in that role?
2. What are the most important aspects of your job and why?
3. Serving as the lead disciplinarian in your school, what are your experiences with zero tolerance policies?
4. What are the zero tolerance policies used in your school?
5. Describe the policy and discipline that occurs if the policy is violated.
6. In what ways do you feel this discipline is effective or ineffective?
7. How does this discipline impact the student when they return to school?
8. What students do you feel are most impacted by these policies?
9. How do you feel zero tolerance policies impact students and the school?
10. Do you feel this policy is fair for all students?
11. Based on your previous response, do you feel that this current disciplinary policy is targeting a particular subgroup of students? If so, who and why?
12. How do students impacted by the policy receive alternative equitable education opportunities upon suspension?

13. Ideally what role should School Resource Officers play in equitably implementing zero tolerance policies?
14. What have you seen as the experience for students with their interaction with School Resource Officers?
15. Do you have other comments that relate to the topic that have not been addressed in the previous questions?