Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) for Title 1 Schools: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices against African American students contributes significantly to the preschool-to-prison pipeline, highlighting the need for equitable alternatives. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has been promoted as a framework for reducing exclusionary practices by emphasizing prevention, consistency, and equity. This qualitative phenomenological study explored teachers' perceptions of PBIS implementation, its effectiveness in addressing disproportionate discipline, and the challenges that limit its fidelity. Semi-structured interviews with 8 preschool teachers from Title 1 schools were analyzed thematically using MAXQDA software and implementation science as a guiding framework. Findings revealed that teachers valued PBIS interventions and incentives as tools for prevention but noted inconsistent implementation across classrooms, insufficient resources and staffing, and a lack of culturally responsive professional development. Teachers also emphasized the ongoing disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on students of color, describing their roles as navigating bias, advocating for fairness and collaborating with colleagues to strengthen equity through PBIS. Implications for practice include the need for ongoing professional learning centered on equity, and collaborative engagement among educators. The study contributes to the literature by elevating teacher voices in understanding the complexities of PBIS implementation and by highlighting the conditions necessary for PBIS to fulfill its potential as a tool for equity in discipline and as a means of disrupting the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

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Section 1: Foundation

Racial disparities in the United States have been present in all aspects of the education system since its inception. Beginning with slavery, to the Plessy v. Ferguson's ruling of separate but equal, the bussing of minority children to mostly white schools in many cities across the nation have all had a significant impact on racism in the education system (Domina et al., 2021). In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an outstanding increase in crime throughout the nation, much of it stemming from the drug epidemic. The response to this increase in crime was stricter penalties for criminals, including the three strikes policy. The three strikes policy was intended to deter repeat offenders by extending sentences and imposing mandatory minimum sentences for certain offenses, thus keeping offenders from society for longer periods of time (Datta, 2017). This policy had an influence on zero tolerance policies that were adopted by many school districts, nationwide. Many of these zero tolerance policies included predetermined consequences for specific acts committed by students without any additional considerations (Nance & Heise, 2022). Some of the consequences are mandatory 1 year expulsion for firearms on campus, referral of students to the juvenile justice system for activity that constitutes a criminal offense such as possession of weapons or drugs on campus, assault, and threats of violence, and limiting school administrators' authority so they are unable to avoid expulsion under certain circumstances (Johnson & Johnson, 2023).

In recent years race relations have been heightened due to the widespread coverage of the increased police brutality against African Americans. Very high-profile cases such as Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, and George Floyd have given African American citizens a sense of unease when it comes to interactions with police and law enforcement. Systemic racism has had a significant impact on the interactions between educational staff, families, and students. Racial

disparities in school are most obvious when looking at the use of exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2023) in the 2020-21 school year, African American public preschool children made up 17% of total preschool enrollment but represented 31% of children that received at least one out-of-school suspension, a rate nearly twice their enrollment, and 25% of preschoolers that were expelled. Children that are subject to exclusionary discipline are 30% more likely to be arrested at least once, 51% more likely to be arrested two or more times, 49% more likely to be on probation, and 23% more likely to be incarcerated and these figures are carried disproportionately by minority children (Alexander, 2021).

The preschool to prison pipeline is the "term used to describe the connection between exclusionary punishments and involvement in the criminal justice system" (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021, p. 53). Early childhood (birth through age 5 years old) expulsions and suspensions are becoming a heightened concern and can be associated with further problems in school and beyond (Garro et al., 2021; Sevon, 2022). Unfortunately, minority students, especially African American males, are more likely to be subject to exclusionary discipline than whites and are disproportionately represented in prisons (California Department of Education, n.d.). Many public schools have recently seen an increase in the sustained presence of law enforcement on campus due, in part, as a response to the increase in horrific school shootings such as the North Park shooting in California, Sandy Hook shooting in Connecticut, and the Uvalde school shooting in Texas (Nance & Heise, 2022). This increase in the presence of law enforcement means that more minority students are being reported to law enforcement agencies for subjective behavior (defiance, disruption, and disrespect) infractions.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a Tier 1 universal programming strategy that is being adopted by many districts nationwide. It is an evidence-based strategy that is intended to reform discipline by preventing challenging student behaviors and promoting prosocial skills using a variety of evidence-based practices, procedures, and expectations (Corbin, et al., 2022). To date, at least 25,000 schools are implementing some form of PBIS as of 2018 (Kittelman et al., 2019). These strategies are intended for use with all children, including those from diverse backgrounds, those with learning disabilities, as well as dual language learners. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports combines key principles of behavior analysis using data-collection to identify behaviors, instructional practices, and classroom management (Petrasek et al., 2022). The basis of PBIS is that behavioral expectations are taught explicitly and providing consistent support and reinforcement can create a positive school climate and culture that is conducive to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for all students (Petrasek et al., 2022). Key features of PBIS include teaching a small number of well defined, positively stated school/program wide expectations, a reward system to acknowledge prosocial student behavior, and established consequences so discipline remains consistent and behavior expectations are retaught to encourage more appropriate behaviors (Lawrence et al., 2022).

The key to successful implementation is fidelity, which is lacking in many districts. Implementation with fidelity includes features such as having a dedicated implementation team, data analysis, well defined program wide expectations being taught, and staff buy-in (Scherer & Ingle, 2020). School wide PBIS implementation has been stilted in many districts for several reasons, with many teachers citing a lack of time and materials (Corbin et al., 2022). There are a variety of self-assessment tools available, such as the Facility-Wide Tiered Fidelity Inventory

(v0.2), PBIS District Systems Fidelity Inventory Manual, and the Self-Assessment Survey, to determine if all components are present for PBIS implementation (Center on PBIS, 2025). Research has shown that schools serving lower socioeconomic communities and schools implemented with lower fidelity than other types of schools (Gottfredson et al., 2002; Molloy et al., 2013). In one study (Nese et al., 2016) Title 1 schools were three times more likely than non-Title 1 schools to abandon PBIS implementation. While some administrators are aware of the challenges that teachers may be facing regarding implementation, they struggle with meeting the individual needs of the teachers to better support them in implementing with fidelity. This leaves many teachers not only struggling with classroom management but also without support in how to meet the needs of each individual student.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addressed is that African American preschool students continue to face disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline compared to their peers despite efforts, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), to create equitable education environments (Education Data, 2024; Morgan 2021; US Dept. of Education, 2019). The use of exclusionary discipline practices removes students from the educational setting and contribute to negative academic and social outcomes. Children that are subjected to exclusionary discipline are at increased risk of juvenile delinquency, incarceration as an adult, inadequate opportunities to develop critical social and emotional skills, grade level retention, and increased dropout rates (Dutil, 2020; Enders, 2022). The classroom environment is also affected using exclusionary discipline by causing frequent disruptions within the learning environment, other children may develop feelings of insecurity and teachers develop increased stress and burnout (Steglin et al., 2020). All these factors can cause strained relationships between schools, families

and communities which can lead to decreased community support and engagement. Children that are suspended or expelled are 6% less likely to finish high school and 24% less likely to complete an undergraduate degree (Alexander, 2021). Communities bear the social and economic costs of these outcomes through increased crime rates and the need for social services (Yang et al., 2018). The persistence of these disparities highlights the need for effective interventions that address the root causes of disproportionate discipline and promote equitable practices. Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions is a proactive approach that emphasizes positive behavior reinforcement and data-driven decision-making to improve school climate and student behavior. While PBIS has been shown to reduce overall disciplinary incidents, its effectiveness in specifically addressing racial disparities in discipline has not been thoroughly examined (Enders, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' perceptions regarding PBIS implementation and effectiveness and their observations of disciplinary practices affecting African American students. By examining teachers' perceptions of PBIS effectiveness and disciplinary practices affecting African American students, this study intended to provide valuable insights into the challenges and successes linked to PBIS implementation in Title 1 schools where latency is less likely to occur (Nese et al., 2019). The school district that the teachers were sampled from is in the Inland Empire region of Southern California. The schools within this district are all Title 1 schools. The target population was preschool teachers that work at Title 1 schools implementing PBIS. The ideal sample size was 8 preschool teachers. Convenience sampling was used to determine the sample. An email was sent out with an inclusion survey to determine preschool teachers that met the criteria. The target

population was teachers that have at least 1 year of teaching experience and hold a valid teacher's permit or higher issued by the California Commission for Teacher Credentialing, and at least 5 teachers with an undergraduate or higher degree. The instrumentation for this study included individual semi structured interviews and observations. I analyzed the data using a thematic analysis method.

Research Questions

RQ1

How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of PBIS in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices (such as suspensions and expulsions) in African American students?

RQ2a

What challenges do teachers face in implementing PBIS with fidelity to reduce exclusionary discipline?

RQ2b How can perceived challenges and limitations be addressed to enhance PBIS impact in addressing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in African American students?

RQ3

How do teachers make sense of their role in ensuring equitable discipline practices through PBIS implementation?

Conceptual Framework

Implementation science focuses on understanding the process of implementing evidence-based practices, in real world settings. Implementation science provides a structured approach to applying research findings into practice, ensuring that programs and interventions are effectively integrated and sustained in real-world settings (Charlton et al., 2020). Implementation science

identifies factors and variables that are central to successful adoption and sustainability of an intervention but its application within the educational setting is relatively new and there are many areas which require further research within the discipline (Moir, 2018). When used as a conceptual framework for PBIS, implementation science can help guide the systematic adoption, execution, and maintenance of PBIS practices within schools. Implementation science can be used to examine factors that facilitate or hinder successful PBIS implementation within schools, including examining organizational factors, leadership support, staff buy-in, and fidelity of implementation (Charlton et al., 2020). These are all factors that this study seeks to address in examining the variables that staff have identified in increased or decreased likelihood of buy–in.

The four stages of implementation are exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, and sustainability. At the exploration stage, the needs of the school and PBIS readiness are assessed (Yeon, 2024). The leadership team should identify any potential benefits and challenges of implementing PBIS. During the installation stage the necessary infrastructure is prepared as well as resources and training (Yeon, 2024). Leadership teams are established and staff buy-in is secured. During the initial implementation stage PBIS practices are applied on a small scale (Yeon, 2024). The leadership team monitors and adjusts based on initial feedback and outcomes. Full implementation scales up the use of PBIS practices across the entire school, district, or program (Yeon, 2024). The leadership team ensures fidelity to the PBIS model and makes necessary adjustments. The last stage, sustainability, shows that PBIS practices are maintained and refined over time. This stage focuses on continuous improvement and addressing emerging challenges as they arise (Moir, 2018).

The key components that influence successful implementation are implementation drivers, implementation teams, data-driven decision making, contextual fit, and sustainability

and scale-up. There are three implementation drivers: competency drivers, organization drivers, and leadership drivers. Competency drivers ensure that staff have the necessary skills and knowledge through training, coaching, and performance assessment (Charlton et al., 2020). Organization drivers develop effective leadership, provide administrative support, and create a supportive school culture (Charlton et al., 2020). Leadership drivers engage in both technical and adaptive leadership to manage implementation challenges and guide the school through the change process (Charlton et al., 2020). Forming dedicated teams to oversee the PBIS implementation process can enhance accountability and provide ongoing support. These teams can plan and coordinate the implementation activities, monitor progress and fidelity of PBIS practices, provide coaching and professional development to staff, and collect and analyze data to inform decision-making (Charlton et al., 2020).

Using data to guide the implementation process is a central component of both implementation science and PBIS. Baseline data needs to be collected to understand the status and identify areas of improvement (Center on PBIS, 2025). Data should be regularly collected on PBIS practices and student outcomes to track progress. Data should also be used to ensure that PBIS is being implemented as intended. The impact of PBIS on student behavior, academic performance, and school climate also needs to be regularly and continuously assessed (Center on PBIS, 2025).

Ensuring that PBIS practices are tailored to the specific context of the school is critical for successful implementation. Positive behavior interventions and support practices should be adapted to fit the cultural and linguistic needs of the student population (Charlton et al., 2020). Adjustments to the implementation plan must be made based on available resources, such as

funding, staff, and materials. All stakeholders, including students, families, and community members, are involved in the planning and implementation process to gain buy-in and support.

Implementation science emphasizes the importance of sustainability and the ability to scale up successful practices. To both sustain and scale up PBIS practices schools and districts need to continuously build the capacity of staff and leadership over time (Yeon, 2024). Administrators must also establish mechanisms for ongoing evaluation and improvement of PBIS practices to adapt to changing needs and contexts (Yeon, 2024).

Addressing inequities in discipline using PBIS requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that acknowledges the complex relationship of factors contributing to disparities. Educators need to acknowledge that discipline disparities exist within educational settings and recognize the impact of systemic racism, implicit bias, and other forms of discrimination on student outcomes. Implementing PBIS practices that are culturally responsive and inclusive that consider the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities of students is one way to begin addressing disparities in discipline practices. Educators should also ensure that behavioral expectations, interventions, and support are relevant and meaningful to all students. Administrators need to offer ongoing professional development and training for educators and staff on topics such as cultural competence, implicit bias, restorative practices, and trauma-informed care. Educators and stakeholders must also examine and address the structural and systemic barriers that contribute to discipline inequities, such as inequitable school policies, resource allocation disparities, and the overreliance on punitive disciplinary practices. By examining teachers' perspectives of PBIS implementation and the effectiveness of PBIS in diverse student populations, stakeholders can begin to understand what factors are most important to begin creating more equitable policies and procedures for their unique

demographics. The perspectives of the individuals is tantamount to understanding the factors that are both facilitating and hindering successful PBIS implementation in Title 1 schools.

Definitions of Key Terms

Diverse Populations

Diverse populations in education recognize a student's ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, disabilities and gender identity among other things (Habib & Morse, 2022).

Exclusionary Discipline/Punishment

Exclusionary discipline or punishment refers to any type of school action that removes or excludes students from their usual educational setting (Fisher, 2023).

Implementation with Fidelity

Implementation with fidelity refers to the extent to which an intervention or program is delivered as intended (Pas et al., 2019).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a framework that is intended to promote positive prosocial behavior and create a supportive school environment that enhances academic and social-emotional outcomes for all students (Kurth et al., 2024).

Preschool to Prison Pipeline

The preschool to prison pipeline is a term that is used to describe the connection between children from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds that are subject to exclusionary punishment and subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

Tier 1 Interventions

Tier 1 interventions, also referred to as primary level interventions, are interventions that are delivered to all students by delivering consistent proactive support and preventing unwanted behaviors (Center on PBIS, 2025).

Title 1 Schools

Title 1 programs are federally funded programs authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 that are intended to help disadvantaged students meet state academic content and performance standards (CA Dept of Education, 2023).

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the current literature that discusses the disproportionate percentage of minority children facing exclusionary discipline practices in public preschool programs. The effect that this early label of delinquency has on children later as they progress through the education system may lead them to escalating behaviors resulting in time in prison. This literature review will also examine the increased implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as an alternative to the use of exclusionary discipline as well as teacher perceptions that have an impact on implementation with fidelity which is tantamount to PBIS success.

The two databases that were utilized to find all sources were Google Scholar and the National University library. Some of the key words and phrases that were used to find sources were PBIS, school to prison pipeline, PBIS implementation, exclusionary discipline, trauma-informed care/practice, early childhood education quality and racial disparities, racial disparities and socioeconomic status and sub-field of education, racial disparities in contextual factors in education, racial disparities in school discipline, racial disparities in family engagement (i.e.,

added in education in sub-field), cultural responsiveness in discipline, restorative practices in schools, cultural competence and discipline in schools, teacher training/teacher education/professional development and social emotional learning/social emotional development/social emotional learning (SEL), teacher training/teacher education/professional development and evidence based practice and discipline practices, teacher perspectives/attitudes/views/perceptions and discipline practices, social emotional learning, and equity behavior practices in education. The initial search included full text, peer-reviewed journals published within the last 5 years. After the initial search, seminal articles and books were included in the search parameters.

Racial Disparities in the Education System. Racial disparities have been present within the school system since the founding of the United States (US Dept. of Education, 2019). While there have been measures and legislation put into place to combat the effects of racial inequity, there still seems to be a huge disparity within public preschools. The inequity seems to exist not only in the quality of care that is available for in areas of poverty and for minority families, there seems to also be inconsistencies in the way in which discipline is used in public preschool programs (Education Data, 2024). Minority children are at greater risk of facing suspension or expulsion from public preschool programs as a means of discipline which can lead to later behavioral issues and juvenile delinquencies (Yang et al., 2019). This phenomenon is known as the “preschool to prison pipeline” (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021, p. 53).

In the “preschool to prison pipeline” phenomenon, minority children, especially African American males, are disproportionately suspended and expelled from early childhood education programs due to perceived challenging behaviors. This can be attributed to teachers' perceptions that these behaviors may result in the child becoming a danger to themselves or others. Teachers

are facing higher levels of stress because of a lack of training and support in managing these behaviors in the classroom in addition to managing the rest of the children in the classroom (Steglin et al., 2020).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a framework that typically involves teaching specific predetermined behavioral expectations and providing consistent support and reinforcement. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports emphasizes proactive strategies to prevent behavior problems before they occur. Some strategies that PBIS stress are setting clear behavioral expectations for all students, explicitly teaching the expectations, and implementing preventive measures such as classroom routines, structured activities and classroom configuration (Clemens et al., 2022; Petrasek et al., 2022). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports encourages the use of positive reinforcement to acknowledge and reward students for demonstrating appropriate behavior (Center on PBIS, 2024). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports also relies on data to inform decision-making and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (Clemens et al., 2022). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports promotes cultural responsiveness and equity by recognizing and respecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all students (Clemens et al., 2022; Enders, 2022; Petrasek et al., 2022).

There is mounting evidence that shows PBIS is effectively improving outcomes for all students (including minorities, English language learners, and students with disabilities) such as improved behavior, social emotional development, mental health, and academic performance (Enders, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). These outcomes are supposed to be inclusive of all students but there is little research to show that PBIS is successful in decreasing the disparity between suspensions of minority students and white students. With all the evidence

pointing to the effectiveness of PBIS in managing challenging behaviors, there should be more evidence alluding to the effectiveness in minimizing racial disparities in exclusionary discipline as well. PBIS framework has not been shown to decrease the race-based disproportionality of behavioral evaluation that may be due in part to prejudice or bias (Enders, 2022; Taylor et al., 2023).

Racial Disparities within Quality of Public Preschool Programs

One of the key aspects that contributes to the effectiveness of public preschool programs is the quality. Key characteristics of quality early childhood education programs include small class sizes, highly qualified and well-trained staff, and developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction (Allee et al., 2024). The effects on achievement that are present in children that attend high quality early childhood education programs tend to dissipate after their transition into elementary school (Dong et al., 2023; Kose, 2023). It is even less likely that these effects will continue to have an impact on academic achievement if children attend public preschool programs in low-income areas due to disparities in the quality of programs offered (Fuller & Leibovitz, 2022; Hollett & Frankenberg, 2022; Ou et al., 2019). Racial disparities and socioeconomic disparities continue to exist and create profound barriers for families seeking quality early childhood education programs. Children build their academic foundation and develop social and emotional skills needed to effectively display kindergarten readiness when they are enrolled in quality early childhood education programs. If these skills are also dissipating as children transition into kindergarten, this can be a contributing factor into later exhibition of challenging behaviors. This is why it is also important to take action to eliminate inconsistencies in public preschool programs.

Quality in education, especially early childhood education, is an important issue because it has the potential to reduce or mitigate academic achievement gaps that are present. Academic achievement gaps are described as differences in education outcomes between groups of children and are based on average reported performance levels for the two groups (Dong et al., 2023). Academic achievement gaps are influenced by societal structures such as socioeconomic disparities and residential segregation (Denton, 1996; Dong et al., 2023). Understanding if high quality early childhood education programs can reduce or mitigate achievement gaps is important in creating equity in access and quality for all children, especially those faced with disadvantages. Access to high quality early childcare and education has the potential as a viable solution because it has been associated with higher academic attainment and reduces inequities that may be present (Betancur et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2023). Not addressing achievement gaps can have detrimental effects such as increased poverty, inequitable opportunities including access to high quality education, lack of employment opportunities, social emotional consequences including low self-esteem, and health disparities (Betancur et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2023).

Developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction, which is a key aspect of high-quality early childhood education, can manifest racial disparities when curriculum and instruction are not culturally and linguistically sensitive. Curriculum content that fails to reflect the diverse experiences and contributions of historically marginalized groups can further widen the achievement gap (Enders, 2022). Instructional practices can add to this by being insensitive or biased, leading to differential treatment and outcomes for minority students. When instruction does not take into consideration cultural contexts, students, especially minority students, can be faced with feeling alienated (Enders, 2022; Narine et al., 2022). Curriculum and instruction that

is not culturally appropriate and relevant can lead to disciplinary type problems and low academic achievement, especially among African American and Hispanic children (Enders, 2022; Narine et al., 2022). Non-White kindergarten students are more likely to be sent to an alternative education program to address disciplinary problems (Narine et al., 2022). The use of exclusionary practices for the kinds of discipline problems that may arise from feeling alienated extends from the school into society where those children become adults that have trouble with social integration.

There is also a disconnect between university coursework and classroom instruction as it relates to curriculum. University coursework and teacher credentialing programs often require prospective teachers to take classes and study pedagogy in multicultural teaching as well as courses in family, school and community relationships. Teachers, then, are ill-prepared for the reality of rigid curriculum based on state standards and standardized tests have priority over best practices based on theory and research (Ahmed, 2019; Narine et al., 2022). This disparity in curriculum and instruction is acutely present in English language learners, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds that have unique instruction needs (Ahmed, 2019).

Residential segregation is one of the contributing factors to inequitable resource allocation in lower income neighborhoods and schools, which also has an impact on the quality of the education received in these communities. Residential segregation refers to the spatial separation of different racial or ethnic groups within a community (Denton, 1996). The result is often distinct neighborhoods or residential areas that are predominantly inhabited by one racial or ethnic group. This separation can occur through various factors including discriminatory housing practices, socioeconomic disparities, and patterns of residential choice (Denton, 1996; Martin & Varner, 2017). Residential segregation influences education in several ways. Schools

in racially segregated neighborhoods are more likely to serve students from low-income families and lack the resources needed to provide a high-quality education (Denton, 1996; Martin & Varner, 2017). Schools in low-income neighborhoods may face challenges in recruiting and retaining high-quality staff which also contributes to the inequities in education (Martin & Varner, 2017). Schools in more affluent neighborhoods tend to receive additional funding through property taxes and donations. Students in racially segregated neighborhoods may be geographically isolated from high-performing schools. Residential segregation also contributes to the concentration of poverty in certain neighborhoods which can increase educational inequities. Schools serving high-poverty communities often face greater challenges related to student mobility, family instability, and limited community resources, making it more difficult to meet the diverse needs of students and families (Denton, 1996; Martin & Varner, 2017). Investments in equitable school funding and culturally responsive, trauma informed practices can help create more inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all students (Denton, 1996; Martin & Varner, 2017, Steglin et al., 2020).

One of the gaps in the current body of literature is the issue of public preschool funding as it relates to quality education. Although current policies allocate greater financial provisions to children that face more economic hardships, that does not necessarily translate to equity when it relates to quality (Fuller & Leibovitz, 2022; Hollett & Frankenberg, 2022). When districts are underfunded, they must make cost-saving decisions that often result in school closures, elimination of staff positions, increased class sizes, elimination of support services and reduced extracurricular activities (Needham & Houck, 2019; W.D., 2004). More research needs to be conducted, though, to find out why this disparity continues to exist and what can be done to alleviate the inequalities that exist regarding the quality of early childhood education programs.

In addition, there is a lack of diversity in private preschools that tend to also be higher quality programs. There are not as many minority families enrolled in private preschools and even less minority representation in the center (Hollett & Frankenberg, 2022; Kenly & Klein, 2020; Latham et al., 2021).

Racial Disparities in Exclusionary Discipline Practices

There are no uniform laws and standards across counties, cities, or states to govern early childhood education programs, staff qualifications, definitions and measurement for quality, or disciplinary practices. Because of this, exclusionary discipline practices are widely used and accepted in place of more developmentally appropriate behavior management strategies and disciplinary practices. Policies and procedures differ nationwide from district to district, and each has different expectations of their students as well as different procedures for handling certain types of misbehavior. In recent years, many schools are trying to move away from zero tolerance policies that were adopted in the early 1990s as a response to the war on drugs (Datta, 2017). These differences make it difficult for school districts to implement new policies and procedures that have been developed to mitigate exclusionary discipline methods. The use of exclusionary discipline also has detrimental effects on the children. Children that are subject to exclusionary discipline practices are at risk of grade retention, dropout, juvenile delinquency, and possible arrest (Enders, 2022; Forsyth et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2018).

There have been many studies conducted that show a disproportionate number of African American males are suspended or expelled due to discipline problems as are white students regardless of their gender. African American students are more likely to face exclusionary discipline for committing the same infractions as white students (Enders, 2022; Sevon, 2022). Forsyth et al. (2014) found the earlier children begin to commit serious delinquencies, the

likelihood that they will become life-long criminals greatly increases (p. 151). There is also a direct correlation between the use of exclusionary forms of discipline and educational outcomes, juvenile delinquency and criminality (Dutil, 2020; Enders, 2022; Forsyth et al., 2014; Yang, et al., 2018). When children are subject to exclusionary discipline practices, they miss out on their access to instruction time and it limits the time they have available to develop important social emotional skills (Dutil, 2020; Yang et al., 2018). If these students were provided with positive behavior interventions and more culturally responsive discipline practices in early childhood education programs children may have increased social emotional awareness and better coping skills in the future. This increases the need for teachers to be trained in evidence-based practices that can help them to better manage behaviors and lead to less suspension and expulsion.

Teachers' Role in Equity Behavior Practices. Teachers are pivotal in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. To create an equitable environment, though, teachers must be aware of and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Equity in this context means ensuring that all children have what they need (e.g. support, instruction, communication) when they need it (Clayton et al., 2020). This involves understanding cultural norms, values, and potential biases that may affect interactions and learning. Teachers also have the responsibility to apply rules and consequences consistently to all students to avoid any perceptions of discrimination.

The use of exclusionary discipline is also more likely to be affected by teachers' implicit bias (Atiles et al., 2017; Enders, 2022; Garro et al., 2021; Loomis et al., 2021). Teachers' implicit biases can influence their perception, attitudes, and behavior towards students. Stereotypes about certain groups may lead teachers to have lower expectations for academic achievement or behavioral conduct, which can result in differential treatment and discipline.

Teachers' biases can influence how they perceive students' behaviors (Enders, 2022; Sevon, 2022). Research has shown that teachers may interpret the same behavior differently based on a student's race, ethnicity, gender or other characteristics (Enders, 2022; Garro et al., 2021). Implicit bias can also impact a teacher's decision to refer students for disciplinary action. Students of color, particularly African American students, are disproportionately disciplined compared to White peers for similar behaviors (Enders, 2022; Garro et al., 2021; Sevon, 2022). Overrepresentation of referral of African American students can be attributed, in part, to teachers' implicit biases and stereotypes about students of color being more disrespectful or aggressive (Enders, 2022; Garro et al., 2021; Sevon, 2022). Research also suggests that teachers are more likely to administer harsher punishments, such as suspensions or expulsions, to students of color (Enders, 2022; Garro et al., 2021; Sevon, 2022). This disparity in disciplinary outcomes increases already existing inequities and can contribute even further to the preschool to prison pipeline.

Equity Behavior Practices in PBIS. Equity behavior practices are integral to PBIS because they ensure that the system benefits all students, particularly those from historically marginalized or underserved groups. Positive behavior interventions and supports set clear, consistent behavioral expectations for all students which has been shown to reduce subjectivity and potential biases in discipline (Payno-Simmons, 2021). Positive behavior interventions and support encourages teachers to implement culturally responsive practices that reflect and respect the diverse backgrounds of students by creating ongoing collaboration between families and schools where multiple and diverse perspectives are acknowledged (Payno-Simmons, 2021). By integrating equity behavior practices within the PBIS framework, schools can ensure that all

students have access to a supportive and fair learning environment, reducing disparities and promoting the success of every student.

One of the gaps in the literature is the intersectionality and multiple marginalization that exist between groups. Much of the existing research focuses solely on racial disparities without considering how other intersecting factors, such as socioeconomic status, gender identity, disability status, and language proficiency contribute to disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline. More qualitative research is needed to understand the relationship between racial disparities and other intersecting factors to better understand how these factors influence the decision-making process for discipline policies and procedures adopted by school districts (Anyon et al., 2023; Dong et al., 2023).

Another gap in research is how contextual factors and school practices influence the use of discipline. Less attention has been given to identifying the underlying contextual factors and school practices that contribute to racial disparities. Research is needed to examine how school policies and procedures, disciplinary practices, teacher biases, school climate, and resource allocation decisions influence the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline against marginalized groups (Dowden et al., 2024; Stitt, 2023). These factors also influence how teachers use discipline in the classroom as well as how students and families respond to discipline policies within the school community.

Teacher Training in Response to Misbehavior and Discipline

Administrative and teacher training in behavior and classroom management is imperative to ensure that educational staff are using appropriate forms of discipline. It is important for administrators to also have training in appropriate forms of discipline because they set the standard for supporting educational staff, such as instructional assistants and paraeducators.

When administrators are well versed in behavior management as well as developmentally appropriate forms of discipline, they are less likely to allow the use of corporal punishment. Instead, they would encourage educational staff to use non-punitive forms of punishment (Atiles et al., 2020). It is also important that teachers understand what constitutes developmentally appropriate when implementing curriculum and behavior management strategies. A child's background, especially any trauma that the child may be subjected to, must be taken into consideration when planning individualized activities. Teachers that have a good understanding and foundation in implementing developmentally appropriate practices are less likely to use punitive forms of punishment regardless of the feelings and attitudes of administration (Atiles et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2017).

When administrators plan and implement effective and relevant professional development, teachers are given the opportunity to learn new skills. Professional development and training should also be provided to help them identify bias and overcome those biases to better serve minority students and those from lower socioeconomic statuses. Teachers need to reflect on their own biases and take the steps necessary to overcome their biases. In doing so, teachers can better allow and encourage students to participate in their educational experiences more fully. This also helps teachers better understand and empathize with the barriers and challenges that these students may be facing. Teachers and administrators are then able to improve relationships with students which in turn increases the likelihood that social emotional learning strategies can be used to alleviate the occurrence of challenging behaviors (Atiles et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; LaForett & De Marco, 2020; Steed et al., 2021). The goal of these two types of professional development (developmentally appropriate discipline and overcoming

personal bias) is to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline amongst minority students, as well as to provide use of trauma-informed practices.

Implicit biases are not only present in non-minority teachers. Neitzel (2017) found that biases amongst minority educators resulted in higher behavioral expectations of minority children and imposed harsher punishments for those children. Program directors should encourage teachers to identify and consistently confront their own personal biases through relevant training and professional development. This will help to ensure that teachers are providing equitable treatment to all students, staff and families within the program.

Relevant training and professional development are important in creating positive attitudes and perceptions of PBIS. Teacher's perceptions can have a significant impact on the implementation of the framework. Teachers' perceptions of PBIS influence their level of buy-in and commitment to the framework. Negative perceptions can lead to resistance or reluctance to fully engage in the process (Reno et al., 2017). Teachers' perceptions can also affect the fidelity of implementation. When teachers have a clear understanding of PBIS principles and believe in its effectiveness, they are more likely to implement the core components of PBIS, adhere to established expectations, and consistently apply PBIS evidence-based strategies in their classrooms (Scott, 2018; Terrell & Cho, 2023). While adherence to PBIS principles is important, teachers' perceptions also affect how they modify and adapt PBIS to fit the needs of their students. Teachers that understand that PBIS is flexible and adaptable to their unique classroom culture are more likely to modify PBIS strategies to meet the needs of their students and address specific behavior challenges effectively (Scott, 2018; Terrell & Cho, 2023). Teachers' perceptions can influence student outcomes, including behavior and social-emotional development (Reno et al., 2017). Positive perceptions of PBIS are associated with reductions in

disciplinary incidents and increases in positive behaviors (Reno et al., 2017). To maximize the effectiveness of PBIS implementation, it is important for school leaders to address teachers' perceptions and provide ongoing support, training, and resources to foster positive perceptions about PBIS (Scott, 2018; Terrell & Cho, 2023).

One of the gaps in the available literature is that cultural responsiveness and equity in discipline is often neglected. There is a need for more research that examines how teacher training programs are able to address issues of cultural competence, implicit bias, and equity in discipline (Gion et al., 2022; Heidelberg et al., 2022; O'Malley et al., 2019). Further research should explore the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching and restorative justice practices in promoting equitable discipline outcomes for all students.

Use of Social Emotional Interventions as an Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is a framework that, implemented with fidelity, can create a positive school culture and climate that is conducive to academic and social emotional growth. "Social emotional learning (SEL) is the development of knowledge, attitudes, and social emotional skills that support positive outcomes for children in school and beyond" (Steed et al., 2021, p. 6). The use of an SEL approach as a method of discipline has been shown to be more effective for helping children with challenging behaviors. The SEL approach provides children and teachers evidence-based strategies to help children understand and express their emotions in a way that is appropriate for the classroom. Teachers that are effectively trained in social emotional learning approaches are more likely to implement interventions and other strategies to manage difficult behaviors. School leaders need to ensure that there are clear, uniform standards, expectations, and outcomes for children and staff so that social emotional learning strategies can be implemented schoolwide.

Social emotional learning interventions can potentially mitigate the effects of trauma for young children (Atiles et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; LaForett & De Marco, 2020; Steed et al., 2021). This can be used as a trauma informed strategy for educational staff. Social emotional learning strategies can help children understand and manage their own emotions and behaviors more appropriately which in turn helps them to model better behavior for other children. When children do not develop appropriate behaviors and social skills, it can be detrimental to their overall development which can lead to problems with socialization, academic outcomes, and behavior into adulthood (Blewitt et al., 2021; Clayback & Hammeter, 2021).

One evidence-based method that is being used in districts nationwide is Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is a Tier 1 Universal program that is used by educators to prevent social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) problems and ensure equity in receiving necessary support to enable academic and life success (Zhang et al., 2023). When children demonstrate disruptive behaviors, there are a number of evidence-based behavior management strategies from which to choose in order to help the child understand the reason for the procedure as well as to encourage them to follow the expectations. This is a framework that is intended to help with behavior management within the classroom by using universal strategies to support all children and more targeted interventions for those children with more challenging behaviors (Blewitt et al., 2021; Clayback & Hammeter, 2021). Research has shown that there is success in utilizing Tier 1 Universal programming when implemented with fidelity (Corbin et al., 2022). Although there is mounting evidence that shows PBIS is effective in improving student outcomes such as improved behavior, mental health and academic performance, some schools are still relying on use of punitive forms of discipline (Corbin et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

Tier 2 interventions are more targeted interventions for students who require more support than what is provided for all students at Tier 1. This may include small group social skills training, check-in/check-out systems in which students will "check-in" with a designated adult to go over behavior goals and receive positive reinforcement and they will "check-out" with that same adult at the end of the day to go over their progress that day, or individualized behavior plans (Center for PBIS, 2025). When children demonstrate significant behavioral challenges, they may be referred for Tier 3 interventions. Tier 3 interventions are intensive, individualized supports for students who continue to struggle even with Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions in place (Blewitt et al., 2021; Clayback & Hammeter, 2021). These interventions may involve functional behavior assessments, individualized behavior plans, and specialized support provided by a team of professionals (Center for PBIS, 2025).

Teachers play a critical role in using PBIS to enhance social-emotional learning by modeling behavior expectations (Bastable et al., 2021; Clemens et al., 2022). They exhibit positive social and emotional skills such as empathy, respect, and self-regulation. This helps to reinforce social emotional learning concepts. Teachers also incorporate explicit instruction to teach some social emotional behaviors such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Bastable et al., 2021; Clemens et al., 2022). Teachers provide individualized support to students who may need additional help developing social-emotional skills or to manage challenging behaviors (Bastable et al., 2021; Clemens et al., 2022). Teachers collaborate with other educational personnel to align PBIS and SEL strategies across the school community to create continuity of learning schoolwide (Bastable et al., 2021; Clemens et al., 2022).

Although research on PBIS and SEL has rapidly grown in recent years, there are still gaps in understanding how these approaches can be effectively utilized to create more equitable outcomes for African American students (Cramer & Bennett, 2015; Lustick, 2017; Lustick, 2020). With the use of PBIS in most districts nationwide, the rates of exclusionary discipline for African American students is still disproportionately high in comparison with White students for similar behavior infractions. Studies also show that African American students are overrepresented in being referred for Tier 2, more intensive behavior support (Vincent et al., 2012). One of the gaps in the available research is understanding the intersectionality of identities. Research should examine how the intersectionality of identities including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status influence the effectiveness of PBIS and SEL interventions for African American students (Cramer, 2015; Lustick, 2017; Lustick 2020). In addition, the cultural responsiveness of interventions should also be examined (Lustick, 2017; Lustick 2020). This includes examining the extent to which these interventions incorporate culturally relevant practices, perspectives, and experiences that resonate with African American students' cultural backgrounds and identities (Cramer & Bennet, 2015; Lustick, 2017; Lustick, 2020).

Conclusion

Early childhood education programs have as their primary goal to assist in the development of the whole child. They are also designed to give caregivers the tools necessary to continue this development in the home. When children are not able to develop social and emotional skills it is detrimental for their development. They are at higher risk of behavior related incidents and creating a classroom environment that can negatively affect other children and educational staff. It is imperative that early childhood education programs train teachers so

that they are better equipped to implement strategies and techniques to help children work through challenging behaviors. This can alleviate job stress and burnout for teachers as well as create a more positive and nurturing classroom climate for the children. When children are given the tools necessary to self-regulate and express their emotions in a productive manner, their behavior challenges are less likely to escalate, and they have a better chance of success. In all the literature, there is a lack of qualitative research. Teacher and student perspectives should be explored more thoroughly to better understand lived experiences and how those experiences influence use of different behavior/classroom management policies as well as use of discipline in the classroom. By exploring teachers' attitudes, beliefs and experiences in regard to discipline and classroom management, researchers can contribute to the development of more equitable and inclusive early childhood education discipline policies and practices.

Ethical Assurances

This research study received approval from National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any data collection began. Permission from the site where data collection happened was also obtained, in writing, from the appropriate source. Ethical assurances are crucial to ensuring participants' rights, privacy, and well-being is respected throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were apprised that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were informed that they had the right to decline participation, refuse to answer specific questions, or skip any parts of the interview or observation that made them uncomfortable. Detailed information about the purpose of the study, interviews and focus groups, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and how data will be used and stored was provided to participants. Consent forms were

distributed and signed by participants before any data collection began. This consent form served as an indication that they understood and agreed to participate willingly.

Participants' identities and responses were kept confidential and anonymized using pseudonyms in all subsequent reports or presentations resulting from the study. Electronic data was securely stored on an external hard drive that was passkey protected and only accessible to authorized members of the research study. No personally identifiable information was collected unless necessary for research purposes. Privacy was maintained by conducting interviews in neutral, private settings. Informed consent forms, which detailed confidentiality expectations, were signed and filed for all participants and authorized members of the research team before any data collection began. Data was anonymized whenever possible by removing or replacing any identifying information. Pseudonyms or codes were assigned to participants in transcripts and field notes to further protect their identities. Access to collected data was restricted to authorized research members that had signed confidentiality agreements. Electronic devices (including audio and video recording devices, laptops, computers, etc.) were password protected and storage devices were encrypted. Any physical documents were stored in locked cabinets. Participants were informed of all audio and/or video recordings, the purpose, and consent forms were required to be signed prior to recordings. Steps were taken to minimize harm such as providing breaks as necessary, offering mental health resources as needed, and avoiding sensitive topics that may have triggered distress without adequate preparation or debriefing of participants. The participants were informed of how this research aimed to contribute to the knowledge generation or social change that benefits the broader field of early childhood education.

My role as the researcher in this study was researcher-as-instrument. I served as both the data collector and facilitated open and honest conversations amongst research participants. In

this role, I had the ability to observe all the minute details and nuances and conduct more in-depth interviews to draw reasonable conclusions. This also allowed for a more active role in the discussions and I was able to offer valuable input based on my own experiences.

My positionality as related to my role as a researcher is based on me being an African American female from a lower socioeconomic background. I was raised in a single parent household, my parents divorced when I was very young and we lived in a very low-income area of Los Angeles County, CA. I originally attended a Title 1 school but because I was advanced academically, my mom transferred me to a district that was equipped to help me grow. My teachers saw me as disruptive instead of bored. Luckily for me, my mom knew my potential and how eager I was to learn and how ambitious I was, so she took it upon herself to ensure that I had the best opportunity to do just that. All these factors have shaped my perspective and feelings on education. I have seen how the value that is placed on education in the household can affect how children feel and perceive school, but I also understand that there are outside factors that influence their perceptions of school and education.

In addition to this, I am an educator. I have worked in the field of early childhood education for 15 years and I have 2 undergraduate degrees and 1 graduate degree in the field of education. I know what it is like to be a safe place for students that are dealing with unseen trauma, and I know the importance of building relationships with both the students and the families. I know that school is sometimes the only stability that a child has and it is my job to recognize what the child needs and do my best to provide it without stepping over the professional boundaries.

As an African American woman and mother to African American children, I know the dangers that exist to them due to prejudice and racial profiling. I know that they may face undue

hardship because of their ethnicity, and I know that as a parent it is my job to not only impart knowledge to them but to protect them as best I can. I can see both perspectives, that of an educator and that of a student that is facing many outside environmental factors, such as meeting basic needs (food, shelter, health care, etc.), that influences how I behave and respond to school.

I used reflexive practices to reduce personal bias and experiences from influencing the analysis or findings. I reflected on my own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions about the topic and how they may influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I kept a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, feelings, and reflections before, during, and after data collection encounters. This was useful in helping me to identify patterns or themes that may emerge in my thinking and address those immediately. Another strategy I employed is seeking diverse perspectives by collaborating with peers, colleagues, and other researchers that have unique perspectives and experiences. I gained useful insights into my research approach, data collection techniques, and interpretations to identify any biases that I may have overlooked. I also used multiple methods of data collection to cross-validate findings and minimize the influence of individual bias. Lastly, I incorporated member checking so that participants could review and provide feedback on preliminary findings to ensure that their voices and perspectives were accurately represented in the research.

Summary

The “preschool to prison pipeline” refers to systemic patterns that exist to create disparities in education, particularly amongst those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds. Children who experience poverty, trauma, and inadequate access to quality education are at increased risk of involvement with the criminal justice system later in life. Many schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies as well as increasing law enforcement presence on

campus. These measures have the effect of mandating more severe disciplinary being taken for certain behaviors, often disproportionately affecting minority and low-income students. The preschool to prison pipeline is also perpetuated by systemic racism and institutional biases within the education and criminal justice systems. African American children are at the crux of this issue because they are subject to use of exclusionary discipline more than any other ethnicity or race of students.

Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) can play a crucial role in addressing the preschool to prison pipeline by promoting positive behavior, reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices, and fostering supportive learning environments for all students. PBIS also addresses the underlying factors that contribute to disparities, such as inclusion, culturally responsive practices and data-driven decision making, in educational outcomes and involvement in the criminal justice system. There is a plethora of evidence and research available showing that PBIS can be successful in all school settings when implemented with fidelity. The key, though, is implementation with fidelity which is an elusive goal for many districts. An important aspect of implementation with fidelity is teacher buy-in, but malleable factors must be identified and addressed in order to achieve fidelity. Teachers' perspectives and experiences are crucial components in identifying malleable factors that may be impeding implementation with fidelity.

Section 2: Methodology and Design

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2023) in the 2020-21 school year, African American public preschool children made up 17% of total preschool enrollment but represented 31% of children that received at least one out-of-school suspension, a rate nearly twice their enrollment, and 25% of preschoolers that were expelled. The problem this study addressed is that African American preschool students continue to face disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline compared to their peers despite efforts, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), to create equitable education environments (Education Data, 2024; Morgan, 2021; US Dept. of Education, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' perceptions regarding PBIS implementation and effectiveness and their observations of disciplinary practices affecting African American students.

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding the implementation and effectiveness of PBIS in mitigating exclusionary discipline practices that contribute to the preschool to prison pipeline. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how educators experience and interpret PBIS implementation in their schools. The study followed a phenomenological approach, selecting participants through convenience sampling to allow for participants that are easily accessible and are able to offer relevant insights. This study focused on preschool teachers with direct experience in PBIS implementation. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly maintained (American Psychological Association, 2017). Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews, allowing teachers to share their experiences, challenges, and perceived effectiveness of PBIS. Additionally,

observations were utilized to understand how evidence-based practices were adopted, applied, and sustained in real world settings. Individual interviews were conducted in-person or via virtual meetings, depending on participants' preferences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Observations were done in person and an observation check list as well as field notes were collected. Thematic analysis was conducted manually and using qualitative data analysis software (e.g., MAXQDA) to identify common patterns related to PBIS effectiveness and barriers to its implementation.

Design and Method

This study utilized a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological design. Qualitative research is specifically intended to deepen our understanding of the world and people's lived experience in real time (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). It is intended to understand how people make meaning of their experiences and how they interact in their world within specific contexts. Pope et al. (2023) states that qualitative researchers are proposing methods to better understand individuals' experiences, perceptions, thoughts and emotions within the constructs of social rules, cultural patterns that are shaped by the communities and societies in which they live. The purpose of my study was to understand the perceptions of educators in using different methods of discipline for classroom management. This study specifically sought to further investigate how teachers feel about using different discipline methods with diverse populations and minority students.

Mixed methodology was also considered for this research but determined not to be the best fit. Mixed methodology combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. It leverages the strengths of to provide a more comprehensive view of a research question (Caruth, 2013). It is not suitable for studying teacher's perceptions because this involves subjective experiences

which are more appropriate for qualitative research. Quantitative methods may not be able to fully capture the depth and complexity of perceptions. Adding a quantitative component could oversimplify the data and miss important subtleties in teachers' experiences. Mixed methods can be more complex and resource intensive. They require time, expertise, and effort to design, conduct, and analyze both types of data (Caruth, 2013). If the research focus is solely on teacher perceptions, which might be better suited to qualitative exploration, the additional complexity of mixed methods may not be necessary and could make the study cumbersome or time-consuming without adding significant value.

Perceptions are often best explored through in-depth interviews, focus groups, or observations that allow teachers to explain their views in detail. Adding a quantitative component could shift the focus toward more superficial aspects, such as counting or measuring certain perceptions, rather than truly understanding them (Moustakas, 1994). Combining the two methods could, in this instance, lead to inconsistent or conflicting results. Qualitative insights from teacher interviews or focus groups could highlight nuanced feelings or contexts that are impossible to quantify, and the effort to quantify them could create misleading or overly simplistic conclusions.

A phenomenological design is a qualitative research approach that aims to deeply understand the essence of the human experience by exploring the meanings individuals attribute to their lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Mathotaarachchi & Thilakarathna, 2021). In a phenomenological study the researcher is focused on capturing the core aspects of that experience without imposing preconceived interpretations or theories. A phenomenological study is particularly well-suited for investigating teachers' perceptions of PBIS and its role in reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in African American students because of its

focus on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals. More specifically, a phenomenological study would allow researchers to delve deeply into how teachers experience and understand the process of implementing PBIS in their classrooms. This design would provide rich, detailed insights into teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and feelings about the effectiveness and challenges of PBIS. Teachers' experiences with PBIS are inherently subjective and influenced by their personal beliefs, teaching philosophies, and the specific contexts in which they work. Phenomenology is designed to capture the subjective realities, making it possible to understand the nuanced ways in which teachers perceive the impact of PBIS on reducing exclusionary discipline practices. By conducting both in-depth interviews with teachers, a researcher can identify the key themes and patterns that characterize teachers' experiences with PBIS. A phenomenological study can reveal how teachers perceive the role of PBIS in reducing or perpetuating biases in disciplinary practices, providing valuable insights into the potential for PBIS to promote equity in schools.

Case studies involve the need to extensively investigate the inner workings of an issue, event, or phenomenon within the context of the natural world (Crowe et al., 2011). Case studies are especially useful when researchers are seeking to understand and explain causal relationships, for example, when participants are adhering to implementation of a new policy (Crowe et. al., 2011). This design, while fitting, is less appropriate for this study because case studies focus on a single or small number of cases in great depth. While this provides detailed insights into specific contexts, it limits the ability to generalize findings across different schools, districts, or populations of teachers. Since the goal is to understand broad perceptions of PBIS effectiveness among a diverse range of teachers, a case study would not be the best fit. Case studies are also highly contextual (Crowe et al., 2011). The perceptions of teachers in one school

may be influenced by factors unique to that setting, such as school culture, leadership, or student demographics, which may not apply elsewhere.

Another design that was considered for this study was ethnography. With an ethnographic design, fieldwork is carried out in which the researcher conducts long-term participant observation (Howell, 2018). This design method studies a particular social or cultural group with the intentions of gaining a deeper understanding of that group, their perspectives, and their lived experiences (Kramer & Adams, 2017). Conducting an ethnographic study on PBIS effectiveness would require extensive time spent within a school or district to observe how PBIS is implemented and experienced. However, since this study's main focus is on teachers' perspectives and opinions on the effectiveness of PBIS, the lengthy immersion required of a true ethnographic study would not be necessary. Ethnography is particularly suited for studying the culture and social dynamics of a group, aiming to understand people and interact within a specific context over time. A study on teachers' perspectives of PBIS effectiveness is more about gathering individual opinions, beliefs, and perceptions rather than understanding the broader cultural environments or social norms.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality as related to my role as a researcher is based on me being an African American female from a lower socioeconomic background. I was raised in a single parent household, my parents divorced when I was very young and we lived in a very low-income area of Los Angeles County, CA. I originally attended a Title 1 school but because I was advanced academically, my mom transferred me to a district that was equipped to help me grow. My teachers saw me as disruptive instead of bored. Luckily for me, my mom knew my potential and how eager I was to learn and how ambitious I was, so she took it upon herself to ensure that I had

the best opportunity to do just that. All these factors have shaped my perspective and feelings on education. I have seen how the value that is placed on education in the household can affect how children feel and perceive school, but I also understand that there are outside factors that influence their perceptions of school and education.

In addition to this, I am an educator. I have worked in the field of early childhood education for 15 years and I have 2 undergraduate degrees and 1 graduate degree in the field of education. I know what it is like to be a safe place for students that are dealing with unseen trauma, and I know the importance of building relationships with both the students and the families. I know that school is sometimes the only stability that a child has and it is my job to recognize what the child needs and do my best to provide it without stepping over the professional boundaries.

As an African American woman and mother to African American children, I know the dangers that exist to them due to prejudice and racial profiling. I know that they may face undue hardship because of their ethnicity, and I know that as a parent it is my job to not only impart knowledge to them but to protect them as best I can. I can see both perspectives, that of an educator and that of a student that is facing many outside environmental factors, such as meeting basic needs (food, shelter, health care), that influences how I behave and respond to school.

Role of the Researcher

Merriam and Grenier (2019) state that there are three key features that are common in all qualitative research designs. The first is that researchers are striving to understand how people are making meaning out of their experiences in the world. Researchers are interested to learn more about what experiences have shaped people's view of the world and how those experiences have shaped and influenced how they interact with the world. The second is that the researcher is

an instrument in both data collection and analysis. This is an important aspect in qualitative methodology because humans can immediately respond and adapt as necessary based on the needs of the participants (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). If interview questions are not resonating with participants or more insight needs to be gained from asking more related questions, researchers as instruments can make those changes on the spot. The researcher as an instrument can also quickly and immediately analyze data as it is being collected and they can summarize to ensure that all aspects of the conversation (i.e., verbal and nonverbal communication) are captured in the meaning of the data. The third characteristic is that because of the nature of qualitative research it is rich in description (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). For example, words and pictures are relied on heavily to convey all the information that the researcher is able to collect about the topic. When findings are presented, they are supported with direct quotations and the stories and transcripts are considered as evidence (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Population and Sample

Participants were between the ages of 18 and 60 years old, any gender, preschool teachers, with some college and holding a child development teacher permit or higher. Participants must have received training or professional development in PBIS and have implemented it in their classrooms or school setting. Participants had a minimum of 1 year teaching experience. The teachers need to be familiar enough to assess the impact of PBIS. The teachers should have varying levels of teaching experience because their perceptions will differ based on their experience levels. More experienced teachers may possibly have stronger points of comparison with other behavior management systems. Teachers that previously used exclusionary discipline as a form of classroom management are now transitioning into other forms of classroom management and PBIS which may be presenting different challenges.

Participants were required to be current teachers working in a Title 1 school that receives federal funding for low-income student populations. Participants must teach preschool or early childhood education (ages 3-5). The demographics of the students may also have an impact on teachers' perceptions of the use of exclusionary discipline. Teachers that only have recent experience with infants/toddlers were excluded from the sample. Teachers with less than one year teaching experience in the preschool were also excluded.

The broader population for this study included preschool teachers in Title 1 public schools with varying levels of experience in implementing PBIS. This population was particularly relevant as Title 1 schools often have higher populations of students of color, specifically African American, compared to non-Title 1 schools (Nese et al., 2019). Teachers in Title 1 schools can provide valuable insights into whether PBIS is effective in creating supportive environments that reduce exclusionary discipline and whether it helps address the specific behavioral needs of African American students (McIntosh, 2023). There was a large population from which to choose but the findings may not be generalizable. By focusing on accessible Title 1 schools, the researcher could gather insights from teachers who work with populations directly impacted by disciplinary disparities and who are familiar with PBIS interventions aimed at reducing such disparities.

The sample size of 8 teachers was deemed appropriate to achieve data saturation, where no new themes emerged. Participants were required to be current teachers working in a Title 1 school that receives federal funding for low-income student populations. Participants must teach preschool or early childhood education (ages 3-5). Participants must have received training or professional development in PBIS and have implemented it in their classrooms or school setting. Participants should have a minimum of 1 year teaching experience. The teachers needed to be

familiar enough to assess its impact. The teachers had varying levels of teaching experience because their perceptions differed based on their experience levels. More experienced teachers may possibly have stronger points of comparison with other behavior management systems. Teachers that previously used exclusionary discipline as a form of classroom management are now transitioning into other forms of classroom management and PBIS which may be presenting different challenges. The demographics of the students may also have an impact on teachers' perceptions of the use of exclusionary discipline. Teachers that only have recent experience with infants/toddlers were excluded from the sample. Teachers with less than one year teaching experience in the preschool were also excluded.

Participants were located in low-income areas within Title 1 school districts. This was relevant to the study because teachers in Title 1 schools who implement PBIS instead of using exclusionary discipline play a crucial role in disrupting the preschool-to-prison pipeline. Exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects students of color, students with disabilities, and low-income students, populations often overrepresented in Title 1 schools (McIntosh, 2023). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in Title 1 schools helps dismantle the preschool-to-prison pipeline by replacing punitive, exclusionary discipline with proactive, equitable, and supportive practices that keep students in schools (Hemez et. al., 2020).

Convenience sampling was used to determine the sample. Convenience sampling allows researchers to easily access participants who can offer relevant insights (Stratton, 2021). It was appropriate because the teachers all work in Title 1 schools, have varying levels of teaching experience, and are available and willing to participate. This was also relevant because participants were readily available to provide in-depth interviews which gave the researcher more time to explore complex ideas or experiences. Qualitative research is generally flexible and

responsive to emerging themes. Convenience sampling allows researchers to adapt quickly, interviewing people in different settings where relevant insights can emerge spontaneously (Stratton, 2021).

Convenience sampling can align well with a phenomenological study because both approaches prioritize the depth of insight into participants' lived experiences over generalizability. Phenomenological research is focused on understanding the essence of a shared experience or phenomenon, and convenience sampling can facilitate this by allowing researchers to quickly access individuals who have had relevant experience (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). Convenience sampling provides access to people who are available and likely have had these relevant experiences, making it easier to collect in-depth, reflective data. Convenience sampling allows easy access to participants which can support prolonged engagement and detailed exploration with each participant, which is crucial for phenomenological analysis (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). Since the goal in phenomenology is to understand the essence of a shared experience rather than to generalize findings to a larger population, convenience sampling fits well (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). It allows researchers to access participants who can provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon without the constraints of achieving a statistically representative sample.

Participants were recruited through professional networks. Participants were invited to participate and indicated their willingness to participate by responding to an email invite (see Appendix A). Participants were provided with an information sheet and signed consent forms (see Appendix B) before participation. Those that were interested in participating received a survey (see Appendix C) to determine eligibility for the study. Efforts were made to recruit

participants of varied socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds, gender, age, and education.

Instrumentation

In this study, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D) and non-participant observations (see Appendix E) were used to collect qualitative data on teachers' perceptions of PBIS effectiveness in disrupting the preschool-to-prison pipeline. These instruments were chosen because they allow for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and provide a rich contextual understanding of PBIS implementation in real-time classroom settings. The combination of these two methods enhanced the study's credibility and validity by enabling triangulation — comparing interview insights with observed practices.

Individual Semi-structured Interview

This study used semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D), allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency in the core topics discussed. The 12 interview questions were developed based on a literature review of PBIS effectiveness and its role in reducing exclusionary discipline and expert consultation with PBIS trained staff. To ensure trustworthiness the interview guide was field tested with PBIS specialists and experienced educators. The interview transcripts were shared with participants for member checking, allowing them to verify or clarify their responses. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person, based on participant preference.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes per session. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy. Transcripts were coded using qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA). Participants signed informed consent forms before interviews

began. Data was anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in the final report. Participants could withdraw at any point during the process.

Observation

The study employed non-participant observations (see Appendix E), meaning the researcher observed PBIS implementation without direct interaction with the participants to minimize influence on teacher or student behavior. A structured PBIS observation checklist was used based on existing Facility-wide tiered fidelity inventory Tier-1 scoring template (Center on PBIS, 2025), department discipline policies and PBIS reinforcement strategies. The observation setting was classrooms of participating teachers. There were two observations per teacher done over a period of 4 to 6 weeks. Each session lasted 45 to 60 minutes. Only written field notes were taken (no audio/video recording) to maintain classroom privacy.

Findings from the observations were compared with interview responses to check consistency. A secondary researcher reviewed field notes for bias reduction. The researcher underwent PBIS framework training to ensure objective data collection. Teachers and administrators received informed consent forms explaining the non-intrusive nature of observations. No individual students were identified in field notes. Participation was voluntary, and teachers could opt out at any time.

Data Collection and Analysis

This section outlines the data collection procedures for this qualitative phenomenological study. The goal was to explore teachers' perceptions of PBIS implementation and effectiveness and their observations of disciplinary practices affecting African American students. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations, followed by a thematic analysis of the collected data.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before data collection began. Participants signed consent forms before interviews and observations. All data was anonymized to protect identities. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Data Collection Procedures

The target population was preschool teachers in Title 1 schools implementing PBIS. Convenience sampling was used, selecting teachers with experience using PBIS. The estimated sample size was 8-10 teachers to ensure data saturation. The inclusion criteria included teachers must have at least one year experience implementing PBIS, must teach preschool in a Title 1 school, and must be willing to participate in interviews and classroom observations. Email invitations were sent to teachers in PBIS implementing schools. Recruitment was done through professional networks and school administrators. Recruitment took 3 weeks, and willing participants used the link on the invitation to express interest. Inclusion questionnaires (see Appendix C) were distributed via email.

Semi-structured interviews were one-on-one and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes per session. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom, based on the participants' preference. After interviews were transcribed, the verbatim transcripts were sent to participants for accuracy verification. Participants were also asked to review and confirm if their responses had been correctly transcribed. Participants were able to add clarifications or request removal of any sensitive information. After coding and identifying preliminary themes, participants were provided with a summary of findings based on their interviews. They were asked whether the themes accurately represent their views. The participants were offered the opportunity to elaborate or provide additional insights.

The initial observation took place 1 to 2 weeks after the initial interview. The second observation took place 4 to 6 weeks after initial observation. Each observation lasted 45 to 60 minutes. After conducting classroom observations, brief follow-up discussions were conducted with the observed teacher. A summary of the observed PBIS practices were provided and the teachers were asked to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Participants were encouraged to clarify intentions behind their PBIS implementation or any discipline-related interactions. A written summary of the observation (without subjective analysis) was shared for the teacher's feedback. They were asked if the description aligned with their intentions and experiences. The findings from the observation were compared with interview responses to check for consistency. A secondary researcher reviewed field notes for bias reduction.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, consisting of six steps: familiarity with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and recording the findings. The data was read and re-read with initial annotations made to highlight key ideas. Next, MAXQDA software was used for coding. Recurring words, patterns, and phrases were identified. Similar codes were grouped into potential themes. The themes were refined and validated by checking them against the raw data. The themes were then compared across interviews and observations for consistency. The theme names were then finalized and defined. Direct participant quotes were used to support key themes and findings were compared with existing PBIS literature. Participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy. A second researcher reviewed coding and themes to minimize bias.

Ethical Considerations

The study was reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical compliance. All data (i.e., interview transcripts and observation notes) was stored in password-protected files. No participant-identifying information was included in the report. Teachers were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary.

Assumptions

Teachers, as professionals, have firsthand knowledge and insights into the implementation and impact of PBIS in their classrooms or schools. This study assumed that teachers could articulate their experiences, observations, and beliefs about the relationship between PBIS and discipline disparities. Teachers involved in the study have been adequately trained in PBIS and are implementing it with fidelity (Center on PBIS, 2025). This study assumed that participants' perceptions are based on authentic engagement with the PBIS framework. There is an existing and recognized pattern of disproportionate disciplinary actions, such as suspensions and expulsions, impacting African American students more than their peers (Blackson et al., 2022; Davis & Welcher, 2013; Denton, 1996). The study assumed this disparity was understood and accepted by the participants as a valid concern. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, as a framework, is designed to reduce exclusionary discipline practices and improve behavioral outcomes for all students, including addressing racial disparities (Horner & Sugai, 2015). The study operated on the belief that PBIS could be effective in reducing discipline inequities, warranting exploration of its perceived effectiveness. Perceptions varied based on personal experiences, school contexts, and the demographics of their student populations. The study acknowledged that findings may reflect a range of perspectives rather than generalizable conclusions. Disproportionate discipline is influenced by systemic

factors, such as implicit bias, cultural misunderstandings, and institutional practices. The study assumed that teachers' perceptions might also reflect these systemic issues, whether consciously or unconsciously. Teachers shared their experiences and opinions honestly during interviews, focus groups, or other qualitative data collection methods. The validity of findings depended on the participants' willingness to provide candid responses. Factors like school leadership, community demographics, and available resources influence how PBIS is perceived and its effectiveness. The study assumed these factors were part of the narratives shared by teachers.

Limitations

This study relied on teachers' subjective views, which may not fully capture the actual effectiveness of PBIS or the nuances of discipline disparities. This could result in findings reflecting personal biases, experiences, or misunderstandings rather than objective outcomes. This can potentially be mitigated by creating a trustworthy environment, clarifying the purpose of the study without disclosing expectations, and incorporating triangulation by comparing data from multiple sources to cross-verify data. Triangulation is important in phenomenological research because it strengthens the credibility and depth of the findings by allowing the researcher to examine lived experiences from multiple perspectives. Using various forms of data helps to ensure that themes reflect the true essence of participants' experiences rather than researcher bias or a single-data viewpoint. Triangulation also supports trustworthiness by confirming that emerging meanings are consistent across different forms of evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative studies often involve small, context specific samples, such as teachers from particular schools or districts. The results of this study may not be applicable to broader populations or different educational contexts. This limitation can be mitigated by diversifying the

sample to increase the likelihood of capturing a broader range of experiences and enhancing transferability by providing detailed, contextualized accounts of participants' experiences.

Teachers' perceptions may be influenced by inconsistencies in how PBIS is implemented across schools, including variations in training, resources, and fidelity. Disparities in implementation may confuse perceptions of effectiveness (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Fidelity observation checklists will be used to measure how closely implementation aligns with the intended protocol. Any deviations or variations from the standard protocol will be documented as well as the reasons for those changes. The researcher will also gather information on contextual factors that may influence implementation. Detailed descriptions of the implementation processes and any observed discrepancies will be provided in the study's findings.

Teachers may provide responses they believe are socially acceptable or aligned with institutional expectations rather than their true opinions. This can skew the findings, making it difficult to determine authentic views on PBIS and discipline disparities. To enhance data credibility the researcher will use member checking by sharing interpretations with participants to confirm that their experiences are accurately represented. The researcher will also provide detailed accounts of participants' experiences to capture the full context and ensure depth. The researcher will also ensure confidentiality and anonymity to encourage genuine, honest responses from participants.

Delimitations

This study is limited to teachers' perspectives rather than including students, administrators, or parents. This means findings reflect teacher observations and experiences, not the lived experiences of students affected by PBIS and disciplinary practices. The phenomenon being studied is the preschool-to-prison pipeline and students at this age may not be able to

articulate their experiences with PBIS. Preschoolers' responses may also lack consistency, with responses based on momentary feelings rather than actual patterns of behavior. Obtaining informed consent from preschool students may also prove challenging because they may not be able to fully understand their participation in the study.

This research study focused on a specific grade level so findings may not apply to all educational levels. Focusing on preschool teachers' perceptions of PBIS effectiveness is crucial because early childhood discipline practices significantly impact students' long-term educational and behavioral outcomes (Durkin et al., 2022). Research shows that preschool suspension rates are higher than those in K-12 education, despite young children being in their most formative development stages (Zinsser et al., 2024).

This study also focused on teachers in Title 1 schools, meaning findings may not be generalizable to non-Title 1 or private schools with different student populations and resources. Focusing on Title 1 schools is essential because these schools serve high percentages of low-income students who are at greater risk of disciplinary exclusion and negative outcomes (Martin & Varner, 2017). Title 1 schools often face systemic challenges such as resource limitations, high teacher turnover, and racial discipline disparities, making PBIS implementation in these settings particularly significant (Nese et al., 2019). Studies have found that students in high poverty schools are disciplined more harshly and more frequently than their wealthier peers, even for minor infractions (Enders, 2022; Sevon, 2022).

This study examined PBIS through a behavioral and equity lens, rather than through broader social justice frameworks. It is important to focus on PBIS through a behavioral and equity lens to maintain practicality, specificity, and direct applicability. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an applied behavior framework, not social activism or

political theory (Center on PBIS, 2025). Using a behavioral approach allowed researchers to examine how well PBIS functions as a practical tool for promoting positive student behavior without combining it with broader ideological debates. A behavioral approach allowed the study to focus on teacher strategies, student responses, and observable classroom interactions rather than broad societal issues. An equity lens ensures that findings directly inform PBIS implementation, helping schools address racial disparities in discipline with concrete, actionable recommendations.

Summary

This study utilized a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological design. Qualitative research is specifically intended to deepen our understanding of the world and people's lived experiences in real time (Pope et al., 2023). A phenomenological design is a qualitative research approach that aims to deeply understand the essence of the human experience by exploring the meanings individuals attribute to their lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Mathotaarachchi & Thilakarathna, 2021). The broader population for this study included preschool teachers in Title 1 public schools with varying levels of experience implementing PBIS. Convenience sampling was used because the participants were easily accessible and readily available. The sample size was 8 teachers to achieve data saturation. Semi structured interviews (see Appendix D) and non-participant observations (see Appendix E) were used to collect data on teachers' perceptions of PBIS effectiveness in mitigating the use of exclusionary discipline, especially in African American students. These instruments were chosen because they allow for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and provide a rich contextual understanding of PBIS implementation in real-time classroom settings.

The study was reviewed and approved by IRB to ensure ethical compliance prior to data collection. All data (interview transcripts and observation notes) was stored in password-protected files. No participant-identifying information was included in the report. Teachers were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations, followed by a thematic analysis of the collected data. Participants signed consent forms before interviews/observations. All data was anonymized to protect identities.

It is assumed that teachers will provide honest and accurate responses about their perceptions of PBIS and its impact on the use of exclusionary practices. Participants are assumed to have a working knowledge of PBIS and its implementation in their schools. The study assumed that PBIS is being implemented consistently across the schools involved in the study. Since the study relied on teachers' perception, responses may be subjective and influenced by personal bias. Findings may not be generalizable to all schools, as PBIS implementation and school discipline policies vary across districts and states. The study was limited to teachers in a specific district. The study focused on teachers' perceptions rather than students', administrators', or parents' perspectives on PBIS and discipline practices. By clearly defining these assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, the study established transparency in its approach and helps for the findings to be interpreted within an appropriate context.

Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological study explored preschool teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in reducing exclusionary discipline practices and disrupting the preschool-to-prison pipeline. The problem addressed in this study was that despite the widespread implementation of PBIS, African American students continue to face disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline compared to their peers. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' perceptions regarding PBIS implementation and effectiveness and their observations of disciplinary practices affecting African American students. This section presents the findings of the study, evaluation of the outcomes, implications and recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion.

Although this study provides important insights into preschool teachers' perceptions of PBIS in Title 1 schools, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study involved a relatively small number of preschool teachers, which limits generalizability. Because phenomenological studies focus on depth of lived experiences rather than breadth, the findings represent participants' perspectives, not universal truths. Second, variability in PBIS implementation across schools may have affected participants' experiences and perceptions. Differences in administrative support, available resources, and staff training likely shaped how PBIS was enacted and, therefore, how teachers interpreted its effectiveness. Thirdly, the study captured teachers' perceptions at a single point in time. Teacher experiences with PBIS may evolve with additional training, shifts in student demographics, or change sin program policy, which were not reflected in this study. Lastly, the study was limited to preschool teachers' perspectives. The exclusion of voices from administrators, families, and students narrowed the

scope of findings and did not capture the broader systemic or community-level influences on PBIS effectiveness. Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into how preschool teachers perceive PBIS implementation and its role in mitigating exclusionary discipline practices. These limitations also provide opportunities for future research to build upon and extend the findings.

Findings

To provide context for interpreting the findings, the demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized next (see Table 1). The study included 8 preschool teachers from a Title 1 school district. All the participants identified as female. Ages ranged from 33 to 52, with an average of 39 years. In terms of teaching experience, 3 teachers (37.5%) reported 1-5 years, and 5 teachers (62.5%) reported 6-10 years. Two participants identified as African American and 6 as Hispanic/Latina. One held an associate's degree, 5 held at least a bachelor's degree, and 2 held master's degrees. Because participants represented diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and varying levels of experience, their perspectives provided a broad view of PBIS implementation in Title 1 preschool classrooms. With participants' demographics outlined, the subsequent section highlights the major themes that emerged regarding PBIS effectiveness and its role in reducing exclusionary discipline.

Table 1

Demographic Table

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Years of Teaching Experience	Ethnicity	Highest Level of Education
P1	Female	25–34	3	African American	Associate's
P2	Female	35–44	10	Hispanic	Bachelor's
P3	Female	45–54	9	Hispanic	Bachelor's
P4	Female	25–34	5	African American	Bachelor's
P5	Female	35–44	7	Hispanic	Master's
P6	Female	35–44	9	Hispanic	Master's
P7	Female	25–34	4	African American	Bachelor's
P8	Female	45–54	7	Hispanic	Bachelor's

This study is organized into three sections. The first section introduced the problem of the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in early childhood education and its connection to the preschool-to-prison pipeline. The significance of PBIS as a framework for challenging behaviors was presented, along with the study's purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review. Section 2 outlines the phenomenological methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis procedures. Section 3 presents the findings, beginning with participant demographics and followed by themes that emerged from the teacher interviews regarding PBIS implementation and effectiveness. Section 3 also discusses the findings in relation to existing literature, identifies implications for practice and policy, and provides recommendations for future research.

This study examined teachers' perceptions of PBIS and its effectiveness in reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipling practices for African American students. Findings revealed that teachers generally valued PBIS as a framework for prevention, particularly using interventions and incentives, but noted that inconsistent implementation weakened its overall impact. Teachers described themselves as advocates for equity and emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness in PBIS practices. They also stressed that equitable discipline requires collaboration with colleagues and families, rather than being the responsibility of the individual teachers alone. Key challenges identified included a lack of administrative support, insufficient training in culturally responsive practices, and limited sustainability of PBIS efforts over time. Teachers emphasized that without consistent implementation, ongoing professional development, and strong leadership commitment, PBIS is unlikely to achieve its goal of reducing disproportionality in discipline. The findings suggest that while PBIS has the potential to support more equitable practices, its success depends on fidelity, cultural relevance, and long-term investment at both the classroom and program levels.

The coding process for this study followed an inductive, thematic approach based on the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Inductive reasoning allowed themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical assumptions or frameworks. This approach was appropriate for the phenomenological design of the study, as it prioritized participants lived experiences and perspectives.

Interview data were analyzed through multiple stages of coding to ensure that participants lived experiences were accurately represented and meaningfully interpreted. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, I first engaged in familiarization with the data. Interview transcripts were repeatedly read line by line, and initial notes were taken. Next, initial descriptive

codes were assigned to segments of text that captured key ideas, such as “lack of admin support”, “need for training”, or “disproportionate referrals.” This stage remained close to the participants’ language to ensure that initial codes reflected their perspectives. I then engaged in collating codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they accurately represented the data set. For example, codes such as “staff shortage”, “lack of funding for incentives”, and “not enough behavior specialists” were grouped into the category “resource and staffing challenges.” During the theme review and definition phases, I examined coherence within themes and distinctiveness between them, continually returning to the raw data to validate interpretations. Finally, the themes were defined, named and organized to tell a coherent story that aligned with the study’s research questions while remaining grounded in participants’ voices. For example, the category “resource and staffing challenges” contributed to the theme Adequate Resources and Staffing. Through this inductive, data-driven process, patterns and themes emerged organically, reflecting the authentic experiences of participants and providing insights into how PBIS is perceived and enacted in educational settings.

Observations were used as an additional layer of verification to ensure that the reported experiences of participants aligned with what was occurring in practice. By documenting how PBIS expectations, incentives, and interventions were applied in real-time, observational data helped confirm whether implementation was occurring with fidelity and whether teachers’ descriptions reflected actual schoolwide practices. When patterns seen in observations matched participants’ accounts – such as inconsistent use of PBIS strategies, variation in reinforcement systems, or limited administrator involvement – this reinforced the credibility of the findings. In cases where observations revealed gaps between stated practices and daily implementation, these discrepancies provided deeper insight into the challenges teachers described. In this way,

observations served both as validation of participants' experience and as a tool for more accurately assessing PBIS fidelity within the school setting.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Rigor and trustworthiness are essential in qualitative research to ensure that findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. Establishing rigor through systematic data collection, careful analysis, and reflexivity enhances the accuracy and depth of the study, while trustworthiness builds confidence that the interpretations authentically represent participants lived experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Credibility refers to the confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). Credibility was established through conducting member checking by sharing emerging themes with participants to ensure their perspectives were accurately represented and not misinterpreted through researcher bias. Member checking revealed new insights that I overlooked, which led to more authentic themes. Triangulation was also used by comparing interview data with program PBIS documentation and Tier 1 referral trends, strengthening the accuracy of the findings. Transferability is the extent to which the findings can be applied to or adapted to other contexts or settings (Ahmed, 2024). Transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the participants, school settings, and context so readers can determine the applicability of findings to other Title 1 schools or similar educational contexts. Dependability addresses the stability and consistency of the research process over time (Ahmed, 2024). It ensures that if the study were replicated with similar participants in similar contexts, the results would be similar. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented data collection, coding processes, and theme development, as well as through peer debriefing to ensure consistent and grounded interpretation. Finally, confirmability emphasizes neutrality and objectivity, ensuring that the findings are

shaped by participants' experiences rather than researcher bias or personal motivations (Ahmed, 2024). Confirmability was strengthened through an external audit process. An experienced colleague who was not directly involved in the study reviewed portions of the raw data, coding framework, and analytic decisions to confirm that the findings were supported by the evidence rather than researcher bias. This process, combined with the audit trail, ensured that the interpretations and conclusions were grounded in participants' perspectives and experiences. Together, these strategies enhanced the rigor and integrity of the study.

Research Question 1

How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of PBIS in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices? To ensure alignment between the study's guiding research questions and semi-structured interview protocol, each interview question was intentionally mapped to a corresponding research question. Research Question 1 was addressed through Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, and 7, which invited teachers to share specific experiences with PBIS interventions and incentives and their impact on student behavior. The two prevalent themes that emerged were the interventions and incentives were valuable tools for prevention, and inconsistent implementation limits effectiveness. Interventions and incentives are essential tools for promoting positive behavior and preventing problem behaviors as outlined by the Center for PBIS (2025). Use of these tools are directly linked to the reduction of the use of exclusionary discipline because they proactively address behaviors before they escalate to suspensions or office referrals (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

Theme 1 Interventions and Incentives as Tools for Prevention. The theme Interventions and Incentives as Tools for Prevention emerged from participants' descriptions of the strategies they employed to support positive student behavior within the PBIS framework.

During coding, teachers frequently referred to classroom practices such as behavior charts, token systems, verbal praise, and tangible rewards (i.e.: stickers, treasure box, etc.) as tools to encourage student engagement and compliance. These recurring references were initially captured through codes such as ‘behavior rewards’, ‘student motivation’, and ‘classroom strategies.’ As analysis progressed, these codes clustered into the broader category of positive reinforcement practices, which ultimately developed into the theme of Interventions and Incentives as Tools for Prevention. This theme highlighted both the perceived effectiveness of reinforcement systems in promoting desired behaviors and the challenges teachers encountered in sustaining consistent implementation across classrooms and grade levels. Observations of schoolwide recognition systems, classroom token boards, praise statements, and reinforcement routines demonstrated how interventions and incentives were applied. In classrooms where PBIS incentives were used consistently, students appeared more engaged, and expectations were clearly reinforced. However, inconsistent or minimal use of reinforcement aligned with participants’ reports that incentives were not uniformly implemented or understood across staff.

Teachers perceived PBIS interventions (such as behavior support strategies) and incentives (such as praise or rewards) as effective tools for reducing the need to use exclusionary discipline. They described these strategies as proactive, allowing them to address challenging behaviors before they escalated when used consistently. Teachers did highlight, though, that there are some children that are apathetic to both incentives and intervention strategies. Participant P2 stated, “There’s always just the one kiddo who really doesn’t care about a sticker or a toy one way or another. Luckily, that hasn’t been the majority.” They feel that these are the students they struggle to support because they do not have sufficient time or resources. Participant P1 stated:

> "Sometimes we don't have enough time with a student to see if a specific intervention strategy will work for them. Like if I have a kid that has an attention seeking behavior but I only see him for 3 hours and there are 20 other kids in the class with their own behaviors, I can't devote enough time to that one kid to see real progress."

For the students that respond well, which is the majority, teachers felt students were motivated to meet expectations, while targeted interventions provided struggling children with additional support. Participant P8 stated, "I think they really do well with the reward system, like getting stickers and everything like that…". Overall, teachers framed interventions and incentives as essential features of PBIS that helped shift discipline from reactive punishment to proactive support.

Theme 2 Inconsistent Implementation Limits Effectiveness. The theme Inconsistent Implementation Limits Effectiveness emerged from participants' accounts of uneven practices in applying PBIS across classrooms, grade levels, and staff members. During coding, teachers frequently mentioned challenges such as lack of fidelity, limited training, differing expectations, and inconsistent use of rewards or consequences. These references were initially coded as 'lack of consistency', 'different teacher expectations', and 'training gaps.' As these codes were grouped, they formed the broader category of implementation challenges, which ultimately coalesced into the theme of Inconsistent Implementation Limits Effectiveness. This theme underscored teachers' perceptions that when PBIS is applied inconsistently, its potential to reduce exclusionary discipline and foster equitable outcomes is significantly diminished. Observations revealed notable variation in practices between classrooms – some teachers displayed posted expectations, used common language, and followed reinforcement procedures, while others relied solely on personal management strategies. These inconsistencies supported

teachers' statements that PBIS was interpreted and implemented differently depending on the teacher or leadership emphasis.

Teachers emphasized that PBIS effectiveness depended heavily on consistent application by all staff. Participant P5 stated, "I can tell when I get a student from another site as a transfer if that teacher is using PBIS or not. The ones that come from PBIS classrooms already know the expectations and the transition is easier for them." Teachers reported that the impact of PBIS on reducing exclusionary discipline was often constrained by uneven or inconsistent implementation across classrooms and staff. Participant P1 stated:

> "I know some teachers give out rewards every day like little toys or stickers. We have treasure boxes, and I use mine every Friday, but I'm not really sure if we're supposed to give something every day or every once in a while, or when, you know?"

While some educators applied PBIS strategies consistently, others deviated from expectations because they felt they did not receive adequate training and were not sure what the expectations were for them. Participant P5 brought out, "They (PBIS expectations and interventions) are effective when you're using them consistently but there's no cohesiveness in our teams or program." Teachers perceived that consistency was critical to PBIS success; inconsistent application not only limited its effectiveness but also risked perpetuating unequal disciplinary outcomes.

Research Question 2a

What challenges do teachers face in implementing PBIS with fidelity to reduce exclusionary discipline? Research Question 2 was explored through Interview Questions 8, 9, and 10. These questions prompted participants to identify barriers that they face in implementing PBIS with fidelity and their use of exclusionary discipline as a means of behavior management.

The general themes that emerged were a lack of administrative support that limited PBIS fidelity, the need for adequate resources and staffing, and the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on students of color.

Theme 1 Lack of Administrative Support Limits PBIS Fidelity. The theme Lack of Administrative Support Limits PBIS Fidelity emerged from participants' descriptions of the critical role school leadership plays in sustaining effective PBIS implementation. Teachers frequently noted that while PBIS provides a structured framework, its success depends on consistent reinforcement, training, and modeling from administrators. During coding, recurring references such as 'no follow-through', 'lack of leadership', 'minimal training opportunities', and 'administrative inconsistency' were identified. These codes clustered into the broader category of leadership barrier, which ultimately developed into the theme of Lack of Administrative Support Limits PBIS Fidelity. This theme highlighted that without visible commitment, adequate resources, and accountability from administrators, teachers struggle to maintain PBIS practices with fidelity, thereby reducing the framework's effectiveness in mitigating exclusionary discipline. Observations showed that in classrooms where administrators regularly visited, acknowledged student behavior, or modeled PBIS language, implementation appeared stronger and more visible. In contrast, in schools or classrooms with little administrator presence, PBIS routines were less evident. These observations supported teachers' claims that leadership involvement influenced staff buy-in and the consistency of PBIS practices.

Teachers consistently emphasized that administrative support played a critical role in whether PBIS was implemented with fidelity. Participants noted that when school leaders failed to prioritize PBIS, the framework became an "extra task" rather than a consistent program-wide approach. Participant P7 stated:

> "Sometimes when I have students with very challenging behaviors, I've had to ask the parents to stay in the classroom with them. I ask for support from my program specialist, and they tell me to document the behaviors, and I do but then nothing, there's no follow-through."

Several teachers reported that lack of structured professional development and time constraints hindered their ability to sustain PBIS practices in the classroom. Participant P4 stated:

> "The last PBIS training we had was good, but it was like going over the basics and they went through it so fast. They went over the plan we have in the handbook, but they didn't give us an answer for what do we do when this isn't working."

Without consistent reinforcement and modeling from administrators, teachers felt that PBIS expectations varied widely across classrooms, reducing its effectiveness in addressing exclusionary discipline. Participant P2 noted, "We are given all these strategies that they want us to use and put into practice, but it's not clear how I'm expected to use them." Participant P5 stated:

> "I know what our discipline policy is and I know how it's supposed to be used in theory. But I don't know how we're supposed to collect data or what we're supposed to do with it if we do have a particularly challenging kid. Like, after I document all the things happening in the classroom, where does it go and what happens next?"

Participants also highlighted that when administration fails to support PBIS, they feel isolated in managing challenging behaviors. As participant P6 explained, "I think it would be nice if we had an open, honest conversation, not just with our team, but everybody [program-wide] because we all have different needs. Those modifications should be addressed in person, together."

Theme 2 Inadequate Resources and Staffing. The theme of Inadequate Resources and Staffing emerged from participants' emphasis on the structural supports necessary for effective PBIS implementation. Teachers frequently described challenges related to large class sizes, insufficient instructional aides, limited access to intervention materials, and competing responsibilities that made it difficult to consistently apply PBIS strategies. These references were initially coded as 'staffing shortages', 'lack of aides', 'limited materials', and 'time constraints.' As the coding process advanced, these codes were grouped into the broader category of resource limitations, which ultimately developed into the theme of Adequate Resources and Staffing. This theme underscored that teachers perceived sufficient personnel and material resources as essential for sustaining PBIS with fidelity and ensuring equitable behavioral support for all students. Observations of overcrowded classrooms, limited support staff, or absence of behavior aides aligned with teachers' accounts of lesson disruptions and challenges managing Tier 1 expectations. Where staffing was sufficient or support personnel were present, PBIS routines appeared more manageable and successful, reinforcing the relationship between resources and fidelity.

Participants consistently described the lack of sufficient resources and staffing as a major barrier to implementing PBIS with fidelity. Participant P8 stated, "There have been times when I don't have a permanent aide for months." Teachers emphasized that while PBIS provides a framework for proactive behaver support, its effectiveness is often undermined by limited funding for student incentives, professional development, and classroom materials. Participant P7 stated, "In the beginning of the year we get stuff to put in our treasure box but that stuff can only last so long, especially when we have 48 students. After that what do they want us to do? Pay for it ourselves?" Several teachers reported that the absence of adequate staffing, such as

behavioral specialist, counselors, and paraprofessionals, placed additional burdens on classroom teachers who were already managing large class sizes and diverse student needs. Participant P4 stated, “It was nice when we had an ABA specifically for our program and he came to the classroom when we needed help. But I don’t think he’s with us anymore and they’re probably not going to hire someone else.” Without additional support, participants expressed difficulty sustaining consistent reinforcement systems, particularly when addressing the needs of students requiring intensive behavioral interventions. Participant P2 noted, “If there’s extra teachers or staff, they should be brought in for support to really help with those challenging kids.” These challenges highlight how structural limitations, rather than teacher commitment alone, can hinder the equitable and consistent application of PBIS practices.

Theme 3 Disproportionate Impact on Students of Color. The theme of Disproportionate Impact on Students of Color emerged from participants’ reflections on how exclusionary discipline practices continue to affect students of color, particularly African American students, even within schools implementing PBIS. During coding, teachers repeatedly referenced patterns such as higher referral rates, differential treatment, and implicit biases that shaped disciplinary outcomes. Initial codes including ‘students of color disciplined more’, ‘implicit bias’, and ‘unequal referrals’ were clustered into the broader category of equity concerns, which ultimately developed into the theme of Disproportionate Impact on Students of Color. This theme highlighted teachers’ recognition that while PBIS offers a framework for equitable discipline, inconsistent application and underlying biases limit its effectiveness, perpetuating disparities in discipline outcomes. While observations do not quantify disproportionality, they revealed patterns such as repeated redirection of the same groups of students or lack of culturally responsive reinforcement. In several settings, PBIS expectations

were presented in language or examples that did not reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population, consistent with participants' reflections on equity concerns.

A prominent theme that emerged from participants' responses was the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on African American students, and the challenge this presents to implementing PBIS with fidelity. Teachers acknowledged that while PBIS was designed to promote fairness and reduce office referrals, patterns of disproportionately often persisted. Participant P4 stated, "I hate to say it, but I've noticed that I am sometimes harsher on kids that have a rougher home life, simply because I subconsciously think it's what they're used to and they'll respond better." Several participants noted that implicit bias and subjective interpretations of behavior contributed to African American students receiving discipline more frequently and more severely than their peers, even within the PBIS framework. Participant P1 explained, "I feel like…it's mainly the Black boys that I see a difference with. The teachers just use a different tone with them. It's just like…it's definitely a bias."

Teachers expressed concern that without explicitly addressing equity, PBIS risks reinforcing rather than disrupting existing disparities. As participant P2 stated:

> "As much as I don't want to yell out something, especially using a tone of voice, but I noticed that some of the students you have to do that with. You have to change your tone, unfortunately, and then they're like 'Oh, I have to stop.'"

Participants also reported that fidelity of implementation was compromised when staff failed to apply PBIS strategies consistently across all student groups, resulting in inequitable outcomes. Participant P7 stated:

> "For me if I know the parent is a certain way with their child at home, I think I have to be that same way with them. Sometimes I forget that they're all 3 and 4 and no matter where they're from PBIS has been designed to fit their needs at school."

This perception underscores that successful implementation requires not only adherence to procedures but also intentional efforts to examine and address the cultural and systemic factors contributing to disproportionality.

Research Question 2b

How can perceived challenges and limitations be addressed to enhance PBIS impact in addressing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in African American students? Research Sub Question 2a was linked to Interview Questions 9, 10, 11, and 12. These questions focused on identifying barriers to fidelity of implementation, such as resource constraints and implicit bias, as well as teachers' suggestions for improvement. The themes that emerged were administrator support as a key factor and collaborators in a collective effort.

Theme 1 Administrator Support as a Key Factor. The theme Administrator Support as a Key Factor emerged from participants' repeated emphasis on the pivotal role of school leadership in determining the success of PBIS implementation. Teachers consistently described how principals and administrators who actively modeled PBIS expectations provided ongoing training, allocated resources, and reinforced consistent practices created environments where PBIS was more effective and sustainable. Initial codes such as 'administrative follow-through', 'leadership modeling', and 'supportive principal' were grouped into the broader category of leadership influence, which ultimately developed into the theme of Administrator Support as a Key Factor. This theme underscored teachers' perceptions that administrative involvement was not only necessary for ensuring fidelity of implementation but also for cultivating a school-wide

culture that values equity and consistency in behavioral support. Observations of morning announcements, classroom interactions, or administrator-led reteaching events demonstrated how visible leadership promoted schoolwide consistency. When such leadership behaviors were not present, PBIS routines appeared fragmented, supporting teacher statements that administrative involvement sets the tone for fidelity.

Participants identified ongoing professional development and training as a critical need for ensuring the fidelity of PBIS implementation. While initial trainings provided a foundation, teachers reported that one-time workshops were insufficient for addressing the complex realities of classroom practice and the diverse needs of students. Participant P4 stated, “The trainings we have mainly go over the things we already know. It would be nice to have a training about what to do when that stuff isn’t working.” Many participants emphasized that professional learning must extend beyond technical aspects of PBIS to include culturally responsive practices that acknowledge students’ cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Participant P6 noted, “So I feel like I know a little bit more because I do my own research, but I would say for our program that teachers need more in-depth training.” Without this focus, teachers expressed concern that PBIS risks being applied in ways that overlook equity or unintentionally reinforce bias. Participant P4 stated, “When I feel like I’ve tried everything by the book and it’s still not working, I have to use my own strategies and do things old school.” Teachers also reported that sustained coaching and collaborative opportunities with colleagues were more effective than isolated training sessions. Participant P3 stated:

> “My program specialist is very supportive. If I have a challenging child, she observes and then gives me some tips to use. She checks in on me, too, to see if we made any progress or if we need to move to the next step.”

Several described a desire for continuous feedback, modeling, and time to reflect on data and practice. Participant P6 explained, “I think maybe if we had teachers or coaches from outside our program that might help. We’ve tried it with our own staff, but maybe they have different ideas, different delivery, but someone from a similar demographic (district) as our kiddos.” Ultimately, participants viewed professional development as essential for building confidence, consistency, and equity in PBIS implementation. Observations of morning announcements

Theme 2 Collaborators in a Collective Effort. The theme of Collaborators in a Collective Effort emerged from participants recognition that successful PBIS implementation required shared responsibility and collaboration among all members of the school community. Teachers frequently highlighted the importance of teamwork with colleagues, support staff, and families in maintaining consistency and reinforcing positive behavioral expectations. Initial codes such as ‘working together’, ‘shared responsibility’, ‘teacher collaboration’, and ‘family involvement’ were grouped into the broader category of collective engagement. This ultimately developed into the theme of Collaborators in a Collective Effort. This theme reflected teachers’ perceptions that PBIS is most effective when implemented as a unified approach, where collaboration strengthens consistency, fosters buy-in and reinforces a culture of shared accountability for student success. In classrooms where teams planned together or used the same behavior instruction schedule, and reinforcement tools, implementation appeared more aligned. These observations supported participants’ beliefs that collaboration strengthens consistency and reduces confusion among students.

Participants described collaboration as a key factor in navigating the challenges of implementing PBIS with fidelity. Teachers emphasized that PBIS is not an individual responsibility but rather a collective effort that requires consistent support from colleagues,

administrators, specialists, and families. Participant P7 stated, “It’s nice to hear from teachers that are going through the same thing you might be struggling with. Then you don’t feel alone or like its just happening to you.” Many participants noted that when teachers, administrators, and support staff worked together, they were better able to problem-solve, share strategies, and maintain consistency across classrooms. Participant P5 shared:

> “I will go and ask my third and fourth grade teacher ‘Hey, what strategies did you use when you were doing preschool, especially in this area because I feel like I really need support? I’ve already tried these strategies, and they are not working. Can you guide through some other options?’”

Collaboration was also seen as a mechanism for accountability and shared learning. Teachers highlighted the value of regular team meetings, data reviews, and professional learning communities where they could reflect on what was working and what needed adjustments. Participant P7 stated, “During our monthly team meetings we have the chance to talk with our team about challenges we’re having in the classroom. They offer advice and strategies and it’s nice getting those ideas from people that have experienced the same thing.” Additionally, participants underscored the importance of involving parents and community members in reinforcing PBIS expectations outside of school, noting that alignment between home and school strengthened outcomes. Participant P5 explained:

> “I start by collecting observations and anecdotes, like when we do our DRDPs (assessments) and I start to notice patterns. So, then I meet with the parents and have a conversation about an issue with their child. I tell them let’s work together. These are the classroom expectations, and these are some of the ways we use to correct behaviors.

What are some things you do at home that work? And then together we come up with a plan."

Despite challenges, such as limited time and resources, participants viewed collaboration as a protective factor that supported fidelity, equity, and sustainability of PBIS practices.

Research Question 3

How do teachers make sense of their role in ensuring equitable discipline practices through PBIS implementation? Research Question 3 was investigated through Interview Questions 4, 5, and 6. These questions prompted participants to reflect on their responsibilities in promoting fairness and equity in discipline decisions. The themes that emerged are teachers perceived role in navigating bias and promoting equity and teachers as advocates for fairness.

Theme 1 Navigating Bias and Promoting Equity. The theme of Navigating Bias and Promoting Equity emerged from participants' reflections on the role of personal and systemic biases in shaping disciplinary practices and their commitment to fostering fairer outcomes through PBIS. Teachers frequently acknowledged the presence of implicit bias, disproportionate discipline, and cultural misunderstandings that influenced how students of color were perceived and disciplined. Initial codes such as 'awareness of bias', 'equity in discipline', 'cultural responsiveness', and 'challenging assumptions' were grouped into the category of equity-focused practices. This ultimately developed into the theme Navigating Bias and Promoting Equity. This theme highlighted teachers' recognition that effectively implementing PBIS requires not only consistency and fidelity but also intentional efforts to examine bias, practice self-reflection, and adopt culturally responsive strategies to ensure equitable support for all students. In some observed classrooms, teachers used restorative conversations, equitable reinforcement, and inclusive language that affirmed all students. These practices supported

participants descriptions of advocating for fairness, addressing bias, and adapting PBIS in ways that felt culturally responsive for their students.

Participants described navigating bias and promoting equity as a central aspect of their role in implementing PBIS. While teachers acknowledged the structured framework PBIS provides for addressing student behavior, many expressed that ensuring equitable discipline practices required more than simply following procedures. Participant P8 stated, “Even though we have the strategies for dealing with misbehavior, but some teachers use them on certain kids more than others. They say that some kids need stricter punishments than others.” Several participants reflected on the influence of implicit bias and subjectivity in discipline decisions, particularly for African American students, noting PBIS could unintentionally reinforce disparities if bias was not addressed. Participant P8 recognized, “I think that because all children are disciplined in different ways at home, it affects how we discipline in the classroom.”

Teachers also emphasized their responsibility to advocate for fairness and consistency across the school. Participant P2 stated:

> “If I know that a child is acting out because of something that is going on at home, instead of trying to stick with the PBIS I might give them a little more attention for a few days. Just so they know someone cares.”

They saw their role not only as implementers of PBIS strategies but also as active agents in questioning discipline patterns, reflecting on their own practices and promoting equity among their colleagues. Participant P4 stated, “If one of my aides or even anyone is being too harsh I’ll step in and ask that adult if they need some time. Sometimes we take out our frustrations on these little ones, and we don’t even realize it.” For some participants, this meant intentionally

adapting reinforcement strategies to be culturally responsive, while for others it involved using data to recognize and address disproportionalities in office referrals. Participant P3 stated:

> "One of the strategies is proximity but for some kids when you get close to them they see it as a threat because of their home environment. So, for those kids I announce myself. I'll say something like, 'Oh it looks like you're having a good time over there. I want to come join the fun.' That way they don't feel threatened, but I can still be close enough to monitor them."

Collectively, these perspectives suggest that teachers perceive equity work as inseparable from PBIS fidelity, requiring both self-awareness and a commitment to broader cultural and systemic change within their schools.

Theme 2 Teachers as Advocates for Fairness. The theme Teachers as Advocates for Fairness emerged from participants' accounts of their roles in challenging inequitable discipline practices and promoting just outcomes for students. Teachers frequently described speaking up on behalf of students, ensuring that consequences were appropriate, and striving to create learning environments where all children were treated with dignity and respect. Initial codes such as 'standing up for students', 'seeking fairness', 'student advocacy', and 'equal treatment' were clustered into the broader category of advocacy. This ultimately developed into the theme of Teachers as Advocates for Fairness. This theme underscored teachers' perceptions of themselves not only as implementers of PBIS but also as critical agents who safeguard equity, address bias, and work to reduce the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on marginalized students.

A recurring theme across participants' reflections was the perception of themselves as advocates for fairness in discipline practices. Teachers expressed a strong sense of responsibility

to ensure that PBIS was implemented in ways that promoted equity and consistency for all students. Participant P5 stated:

> "Sometimes I will be having a bad day and I will feel like I'm being too harsh so I will ask my aides, 'Is it me or is this student having a bad day?' I have to make sure that I'm being fair and not just lashing out."

Many reported that fairness went beyond applying PBIS procedures; it also involved actively questioning patterns of exclusionary discipline, voicing concerns about inequities, and working to protect students – particularly those from marginalized groups – from disproportionate consequences. Participant P3 explained:

> "I have a responsibility to be inclusive of all children but sometimes because of outside factors, I'm told not to or that it's not my job. I cannot just say disregard the needs of this one child because we need to provide the same support and strategies for everyone."

Teachers also described advocating for fairness by striving to apply PBIS expectations consistently and encouraging their colleagues to do the same. Participant P8 stated, "I encourage my teacher friends to attend workshops with me about implicit bias and culturally responsive teaching, especially because the information is always relevant." Several emphasized the importance of building relationships with students and families as a way of ensuring that discipline decisions were grounded in understanding rather than punishment. Participant P1 stated:

> "I always ask the parents what kind of things they do at home when their child misbehaves and, if we can, do those same things in the classroom. For example, if they are not making good choices, I might tell them that they won't get to play with a special

> thing like the tablet like at home. I also like to get an understanding of how the parents are parenting to make sure I'm not too strict or to easy going."

For many, fairness was not viewed as an abstract principle but as a daily responsibility – whether by ensuring incentives were accessible to all students, by adjusting supports for individual needs, or by calling attention to inequities in office referral data. Participant P7 stated:

> "I always do a little survey when I get new students so that I know what they like and what they don't like. I want to know what works for them so that I have at least one thing that everyone will like to make it fair."

These perspectives highlight that teachers perceived their roles as extending beyond compliance with PBIS protocols, positioning themselves as agents who safeguard fairness and equity in their schools.

Evaluation of the Outcomes

This section evaluates the outcomes of the study by examining the themes that emerged from teachers lived experiences with PBIS implementation. The analysis highlights both the successes and challenges identified by participants, providing insight into how PBIS has influenced classroom practices, disciplinary approaches, and efforts toward equity. By assessing these outcomes, the study offers a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and limitations of PBIS in reducing exclusionary discipline and supporting positive student behavior.

Research Question 1

Theme 1 Interventions and Incentives as Tools for Prevention. The first research question examined how teachers perceive the effectiveness of PBIS in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices. Teachers consistently described interventions and incentives as effective tools for prevention, underscoring the proactive nature of PBIS when implemented with

fidelity. Participants highlighted that incentives, such as praise, tangible rewards, and classroom recognition systems were powerful motivators that reduced the likelihood of disruptive behaviors escalating into exclusionary discipline. Similarly, early interventions such as check-ins, tiered supports, and social-emotional strategies were seen as critical to addressing student needs before behaviors warranted removal from the classroom. These findings that incentives are a powerful tool for proactively promoting positive behaviors align with PBIS research that emphasizes prevention through reinforcement and early intervention as more effective than punitive measures (Blewitt et al., 2021; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Petrasek et al., 2022). The theme interventions and incentives as tools for prevention reflects the core components of the intervention (PBIS strategies) and the innovation itself in implementation science. Teachers' perceptions of incentives as preventive tools highlight how the design of the intervention influences adoption and fidelity. When incentives are well supported, teachers are more likely to implement PBIS consistently, demonstrating the importance of intervention characteristics in successful implementation.

Theme 2 Inconsistent Implementation Limits Effectiveness. The finding that inconsistent implementation undermined the effectiveness of PBIS highlights a central challenge in translating policy into practice. Participants described variation across classrooms, grade levels, and even within the same school, which weakened the coherence of PBIS and reduced its impact on student outcomes. Participants' descriptions of inconsistent PBIS implementation aligns with prior research indicating that uneven application of PBIS practices reduces fidelity, diminishes the consistency of expectations for students, and limits the program's potential to reduce exclusionary discipline (Nese et al., 2019; Pas et al., 2019). Participants noted that when some staff adhered to PBIS protocols while others reverted to punitive discipline, students

received mixed messages, which in turn undermined the credibility of the framework. This theme aligns with the fidelity of implementation construct. Implementation science stresses that inconsistent or partial application of core practices reduces effectiveness and sustainability. The teachers' accounts illustrate how variability across classrooms or grade levels undermines program outcomes, showing that fidelity monitoring and systemic alignment are essential for long-term success.

Research Question 2

Theme 1 Lack of Administrative Support Limits PBIS Fidelity. The second research question examined what challenges teachers faced in implementing PBIS with fidelity to reduce exclusionary discipline. Teachers perceived a lack of administrator support as a significant barrier to PBIS implementation which aligns with existing research that identifies leadership commitment as a cornerstone of school-wide reform (Atiles et al., 2017; Vincent et al., 2021). When administrators fail to prioritize PBIS, teachers are left to carry the responsibility individually, which reduces consistency and undermines PBIS's effectiveness in reducing exclusionary discipline. Administrators' inconsistency may contribute to the continued disproportionate outcomes for African American students, as systemic inequities are left unaddressed without strong leadership oversight.

The participants' experiences suggest that fidelity of implementation cannot be achieved without adequate resources, sustained professional development, and ongoing data monitoring – areas largely determined by school leadership. The lack of administrators modeling of PBIS practices also sends mixed signals to staff, reinforcing the perception that PBIS is optional rather than foundational. This echoes prior studies that emphasize the importance of leadership in setting a school-wide culture of equity-focused discipline (Atiles et al., 2017; Nese et al., 2019).

Theme 2 Inadequate Resources and Staffing. The finding that inadequate resources and staffing limited PBIS implementation aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of structural supports in sustaining schoolwide interventions (Fisher, 2023; Nese et al., 2019). While teachers in this study demonstrated commitment to using PBIS strategies, they identified that insufficient funding for incentives and a shortage of behavioral support staff, impeded their ability to implement practices with fidelity. This suggests that successful PBIS implementation is not solely dependent on teacher buy-in but requires systemic investment at the school and district levels. Consistent with previous studies, resource gaps particularly undermine equitable outcomes, as students with greater behavioral needs may not receive adequate support (Bastable et al., 2021; Fisher, 2023). This theme reflects the organizational capacity in implementation science. Adequate staffing, funding, and resources are contextual factors that either facilitate or hinder implementation. Without sufficient infrastructure, schools cannot maintain fidelity, which weakens PBIS outcomes.

Theme 3 Disproportionate Impact on Students of Color. The finding that disproportionate discipline outcomes persisted for African American students, even under PBIS, reflects long-standing research documenting inequities in school discipline (Steglin et al., 2020). While PBIS provides a structured framework for reducing office referrals, participants' accounts suggest that fidelity cannot be fully achieved without addressing the role of implicit bias, cultural misinterpretation of behaviors, and systemic inequities. This aligns with scholars who argue that traditional PBIS, when implemented in a race-neutral manner, is insufficient to dismantle the structural roots of disproportionality (Enders, 2022; Taylor et al., 2023). This theme highlights the need for adaptation of interventions to context and equity considerations. Implementation science recognizes that interventions must fit the population and setting where they are used.

Teachers' recognition of disproportionality signals that PBIS must be adapted through culturally responsive practices to meet the needs of African American students and reduce inequities.

Research Question 2a

Theme 1 Administrator Support as a Key Factor. While the broader question explored the challenges teachers faced in implementing PBIS with fidelity to reduce exclusionary discipline, a related sub-question sought to understand how teachers felt the challenges and limitations could be addressed to enhance PBIS impact in the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in African American students. Teachers viewed ongoing, culturally responsive professional development as essential for PBIS implementation which echoes prior research highlighting the importance of sustained professional learning for achieving fidelity (Atiles et al., 2017; Bastable et al., 2021). Participants' concerns that one-time workshops were insufficient reflect the broader literature, which emphasizes that lasting change requires iterative training, coaching, and opportunities for reflection (Atiles et al., 2020). The call for cultural responsiveness further underscores the connection between PBIS fidelity and equity, as studies have shown that when PBIS is not adapted to reflect students' cultural contexts, inequities in discipline may persist (Ahmed, 2019; Narine et al., 2022). This theme connects with training, coaching, and competency drivers in implementation science. Effective implementation requires building staff knowledge, skills, and cultural responsiveness to sustain practice. Teachers' emphasis on professional development underscores how capacity-building is a core driver of fidelity and equity.

Theme 2 Collaborators in a Collective Effort. The emphasis participants placed on collaboration in supporting PBIS fidelity echoes research that identifies collective ownership and systems-level alignment as central to sustaining schoolwide interventions (Scott, 2018; Terrell &

Cho, 2023). Teachers' reflections demonstrate that when PBIS is viewed as a shared responsibility, rather than an isolated classroom practice, implementation is more consistent and effective. This aligns with findings from previous studies showing that team-based problem-solving, data review, and cross-role collaboration strengthen both fidelity and equity outcomes (Atiles et al., 2020). This theme reflects implementation teams and leadership drivers. Successful implementation requires shared responsibility, collaboration, and distributed leadership across teachers, administrators, and support staff. Teachers' emphasis on collective effort illustrates that schoolwide buy-in is critical for sustaining fidelity and achieving equity outcomes.

Research Question 3

Theme 1 Navigating Bias and Promoting Equity. The third, and final, research question sought to understand how teachers make sense of their role in ensuring equitable discipline practices through PBIS implementation. The findings that teachers perceived navigating bias and promoting equity as integral to their role in PBIS implementation aligns with research emphasizing the intersection of discipline, equity, and educator self-reflection (Enders, 2022; Garro et al, 2021; Sevon, 2022). While PBIS provides structured supports, participants' recognition that implicit bias can undermine fidelity reflects broader scholarship arguing that equity cannot be achieved through procedural consistency alone (Loomis et al., 2021). Instead, teachers must intentionally interrogate their own practices and assumptions to ensure that PBIS does not reproduce patterns of disproportionality for students of color.

Theme 2 Teachers as Advocates for Fairness. The finding that teachers perceived themselves as advocates for fairness within PBIS implementation supports existing research highlighting the role of educators as key agents of change in advancing equity in discipline practices (Payno-Simmons, 2021). Participants' emphasis on fairness as more than procedural

fidelity reflects the broader literature suggesting that discipline reform requires teachers to actively confront inequities and advocate for students' rights (Anyon et al., 2023; Dong et al., 2023). Teachers' advocacy aligns with culturally responsive frameworks, which position educators not only as implementers of behavioral interventions but also as leaders who challenge bias and ensure equitable access to positive reinforcement (Dowden et al., 2024; Stitt, 2023). These themes align with values, climate and implementation culture. Implementation science emphasizes that interventions must align with the beliefs and values of practitioners. Teachers' role as advocates for fairness demonstrates that equity-focused values are not just peripheral but central to sustaining PBIS with fidelity in ways that disrupt the preschool-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2021; Clayback et al., 2024).

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for practice. Teachers' perceptions highlight that while PBIS can be an effective framework for reducing exclusionary discipline, its success depends on fidelity, equity-centered adaptation, and systemic support. The insights presented in this section suggest the need for intentional efforts at the classroom, school, and district levels to strengthen PBIS implementation and ensure it addresses discipline disparities for African American students. Teachers' perceptions reveal key barriers and opportunities which inform the following implications and recommendations for practice.

The findings of this study point to six key implications for practice. First, fidelity requires consistency across classrooms, since uneven implementation diminishes effectiveness. Second, administrative leadership is essential, as strong and consistent support from school leaders drives the fidelity and sustainability of PBIS. Third, ongoing, culturally responsive training is needed to ensure teachers are equipped to apply PBIS strategies equitable. Fourth, adequate resources and

staffing strengthen implementation, as teachers require time, personnel, and materials to carry out PBIS strategies equitably. Fifth, equity must remain central, as addressing disproportionate impacts on students of color is vital for PBIS to fulfill its role in reducing exclusionary discipline and dismantling the preschool-to-prison pipeline. Lastly, collaboration builds collective responsibility, emphasizing the importance of shared commitment among educators, administrators, and families. Below provides a discussion of the implications and the suggested recommendations for teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders.

Fidelity Requires Consistency Across Classrooms

A central implication is that inconsistent implementation undermines effectiveness. Findings highlighted that inconsistent implementation was one of the most significant challenges. School leaders should establish clear expectations for fidelity, monitor implementation regularly, and provide feedback to ensure PBIS is applied consistently across classrooms and grade levels. This echoes research showing that fidelity of implementation is essential for achieving positive outcomes, as partial or inconsistent application reduces PBIS's impact on student behavior (Clemens et al., 2022; Petrasek et al., 2022). Participants described how uneven practices across classrooms and grade levels confused students and weakened PBIS credibility. One participant noted, "Some teachers go over the expectations by location that are provided by the program and others don't. The kids notice and they get confused if it's not the same everywhere." To address this, school leaders should establish fidelity monitoring systems such as peer observations, walkthroughs and data reviews that can help identify gaps and reinforce accountability.

Administrative Leadership is Essential

Participants identified the role of administrators as critical in ensuring alignment and sustainability. When leaders were disengaged, teachers felt isolated in their efforts, reducing morale and buy-in. The importance of administrative support for PBIS fidelity aligns with implementation science research, which identifies leadership as a key driver of sustainability (Yeon, 2024). Participants repeatedly emphasized that lack of administrative support hindered implementation. One participant emphasized this point by stating, “When the director and program specialists are visible and reinforcing PBIS expectations, it makes a difference. It makes me feel like we’re all on the same page and we are all working towards the same goal.” This finding that administrative support is a key factor in PBIS fidelity implies that administrators must model PBIS practices, set clear expectations, and provide resources that reinforce collective responsibility. Visible leadership engagement signals that PBIS is a schoolwide priority rather than an optional initiative.

Ongoing, Culturally Responsive Training

Participants identified gaps in training, particularly in addressing bias and equity through PBIS. This reiterates research showing that culturally responsive professional development enhances teacher efficacy and strengthens equity-focused PBIS implementation (Payno-Simmons, 2021; Vincent et al., 2021). Several described a need for training that directly addresses bias and equipped them to better support African American students disproportionately affected by exclusionary practices. One participant noted, “We got training on the basics of PBIS but not how culture and bias play into discipline. I feel like that piece is missing.” The finding that teachers identified a need for more in-depth and culturally responsive PBIS training supports the recommendation for professional development that is continuous, collaborative, and rooted in

cultural responsiveness to ensure teachers are equipped to address implicit bias and promote equity. Coaching, peer learning communities, and reflective practice sessions can strengthen teacher capacity.

Adequate Staffing and Resources Strengthen Implementation

Limited staffing and resources were consistently identified as barriers. This mirrors findings from Lindstrom Johnson et al. (2020) that resource allocation is critical to sustaining PBIS. Teachers explained that without adequate personnel, interventions could not be delivered consistently, and incentive systems often ran out of supplies. One participant explained, "When you don't have permanent staff and you don't know who is showing up day to day it makes it hard to keep up with behavior charts and data. If I had permanent staff all the time, I could do better with doing PBIS the way I'm supposed to." Schools and districts should prioritize funding for intervention supports, behavioral specialists, and materials for incentives. Adequate staffing ensures that teachers are not overburdened and that PBIS practices can be sustained effectively.

Equity Must Remain Central

Teachers recognized that exclusionary discipline disproportionately impacts students of color, particularly African American students. Without explicitly addressing this disproportionality, PBIS risks perpetuating inequities (Blackson et al., 2020; Davis & Welcher, 2013). This finding reflects broader scholarship on discipline disproportionality, which calls for culturally responsive approaches and data disaggregation to monitor equity outcomes (Vincent et al., 2012). One participant stated, "I see a lot of students of color being put on behavior plans quicker than other students, especially Black boys. We need to address that before we can successfully use PBIS as a tool for fair discipline." Schools should disaggregate discipline data by race, embed culturally responsive strategies and engage families in problem-solving to ensure

that PBIS fosters equity, not just compliance. This requires a shift from viewing PBIS as a neutral framework to positioning it as an equity-centered approach.

Collaboration Builds Collective Responsibility

Findings emphasized the importance of shared responsibility, where teachers, administrators, counselors, and families collectively supported equitable discipline. This resonates with implementation science principles that highlight the role of collective teams and distributed leadership in sustaining interventions (Charlton et al., 2020). Participants described PBIS as most effective when implemented as a collaborative, schoolwide framework rather than as isolated classroom practices. As one participant shared, “When we’re [staff and families] all on the same page about the expectations and using similar verbiage, it makes it easier on all of us, especially the kids.” This suggests that schools should establish PBIS implementation teams, encourage cross-role collaboration, and create spaces for ongoing dialogue around equity and discipline practices.

Overall, the implications for practice highlight that PBIS can reduce exclusionary discipline, but its impact depends on fidelity, cultural responsiveness, and systemic support. Teachers’ insights make clear that fidelity, administrative leadership, culturally responsive professional development, resource allocation, equity-focused adaptations, and collective collaboration are essential for practice. By addressing these areas, schools can maximize PBIS effectiveness and take meaningful steps toward disrupting the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides important insights into teachers’ perceptions of PBIS implementation and its role in addressing exclusionary discipline, it also highlights areas for further exploration. The findings of this study highlight several areas where additional research is

needed to deepen understanding of PBIS implementation, fidelity, and effectiveness, particularly as they relate to equity and schoolwide outcomes. Three compelling recommendations for future research emerge from these findings. While this study focused on teachers' perceptions and experiences, questions remain regarding how systemic factors, stakeholder perspectives, and contextual variations influence PBIS practices and their impact on student behavior. Future research can build on these insights by exploring leadership dynamics, organizational culture, culturally responsive practices, and alternative frameworks that complement PBIS. By identifying facilitators and barriers across diverse settings and populations, such studies have the potential to inform policy, professional development, and school-based strategies aimed at promoting sustainable, equitable, and effective behavioral supports for all students.

This study focused on teachers' experiences in Title 1 schools, where systemic inequities and resource challenges are particularly pronounced. The first recommendation is that future studies should examine PBIS implementation across a wider range of school contexts, including suburban and rural settings, to determine how context influences fidelity, perceptions, and outcomes. Future studies should also include perspectives from multiple stakeholders such as students, families, administrators and support staff. Teachers provided valuable insights into PBIS effectiveness, but students and families, especially those from historically marginalized groups, offer critical perspectives on how discipline practices are experienced. Expanding the scope of inquiry is important because PBIS implementation can vary significantly depending on contextual factors, including school demographics, resources, leadership structures, and community engagement. Including diverse stakeholder perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PBIS is experienced, perceived, and sustained, highlighting potential barriers and facilitators that may not be visible from teachers' perspectives

alone. Such research can inform the development of contextually responsive strategies, policies, and supports that enhance fidelity, equity, and log-term effectiveness of PBIS across varied educational environments.

Findings pointed to the importance of administrative support and collective responsibility. Second, future research should examine how leadership behaviors, school climate, and organizational culture contribute to (or hinder) sustained fidelity of PBIS. Longitudinal designs could capture how these factors evolve over time. This line of inquiry is important because PBIS does not operate in isolation; its effectiveness is shaped by the broader organizational context in which it is embedded. Leadership practices influence teacher buy-in, consistency of implementation, and adherence to the PBIS framework, while the school climate and organizational culture affect how staff collaborate, communicate, and reinforce behavioral expectations. By examining these systemic factors, future studies can identify leverage points to strengthen fidelity, reduce implementation barriers, and create environments that support equitable and sustainable behavioral practices. Such research has the potential to inform both policy and practice, providing evidence-based strategies for schools seeking to maximize the long-term impact of PBIS on student outcomes.

Teachers emphasized the need for ongoing, culturally responsive professional development and adaptations to address disproportionate impacts on students of color. Lastly, future studies could investigate specific culturally responsive PBIS practices and examine how they can be integrated with alternative or complementary frameworks for equitable discipline, such as restorative practices or trauma-informed care. Comparative studies could help determine whether PBIS is most effective when implemented alone or in combination with other models. This research is important because, while PBIS provides a structured approach to supporting

positive behavior, disparities in disciplinary outcomes persist for students of color and those with diverse needs. Exploring the intersection of PBIS with culturally responsive strategies and other equity-focused frameworks can illuminate ways to reduce bias, address systemic inequities, and support the social-emotional well-being of all students. Findings from such studies could guide the design of more holistic, responsive, and effective behavioral support systems that not only maintain fidelity but also advance fairness and inclusivity in school discipline practices.

Future research recommendations need to broaden the scope of inquiry to include diverse school contexts, integrate the perspectives of students and families, and investigate organizational and leadership factors that support fidelity. Additionally, research should explore culturally responsive adaptations of PBIS, examine sustainability through longitudinal studies, and compare PBIS with other equity-driven frameworks. Collectively, these studies could advance understanding of how PBIS can be strengthened as a tool for equity and for reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline. By aligning future research directions with the given limitations, the field can move toward a more nuanced, equitable, and evidence-informed understanding of PBIS implementation and its role in reducing disproportionate discipline outcomes.

Conclusions

The problem addressed in this study was that despite the widespread implementation of PBIS, African American students continue to face disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline compared to their peers. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of PBIS implementation and its effectiveness in reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices, particularly among African American students. his study is organized into three sections. The first section introduced the problem of the disproportionate use

of exclusionary discipline in early childhood education and its connection to the preschool-to-prison pipeline. The significance of PBIS as a framework for challenging behaviors was presented, along with the study's purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review. Section 2 outlines the phenomenological methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis procedures. The study used semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations to collect data on teachers' perceptions of PBIS effectiveness in mitigating the use of exclusionary discipline, especially in African American students.

Findings revealed that teachers generally valued PBIS as a framework for prevention, particularly through the use of interventions and incentives, but noted that inconsistent implementation weakened its overall impact. Teachers described themselves as advocates for equity and emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness in PBIS practices. They also stressed that equitable discipline requires collaboration with colleagues and families, rather than being the responsibility of the individual teachers alone. Key challenges identified included a lack of administrative support, insufficient training in culturally responsive practices, and limited sustainability of PBIS efforts over time. Teachers emphasized that without consistent implementation, ongoing professional development, and strong leadership commitment, PBIS is unlikely to achieve its goal of reducing disproportionality in discipline. The findings suggest that while PBIS has the potential to support more equitable practices, its success depends on fidelity, cultural relevance, and long-term investment at both the classroom and program levels.

The findings presented and interpreted in section 3 provide a nuanced understanding of both the promise and challenges of PBIS as a framework for equitable discipline. Teachers described PBIS as a valuable system that, when implemented with fidelity offers effective

alternatives to exclusionary practices through proactive interventions and incentives. However, they also identified barrier that limited its impact, including inconsistent implementation, inadequate resources and staffing, insufficient culturally responsive professional development, and the disproportionate burden discipline places on students of color. Despite these challenges, teachers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for ensuring fairness, advocating for equity, and working collaboratively with colleagues to support PBIS.

These findings carry important implications for practice. They suggest that PBIS is most effective when supported by strong administrative leadership, sustained by adequate resources, and adapted through culturally responsive approaches that directly address inequities. Collaboration and schoolwide commitment emerged as essential conditions for ensuring fidelity and building trust in the system. At the same time, the study's limitations point to opportunities for future research, including the need to expand beyond teacher perspectives, examine leadership and organizational culture, explore culturally responsive adaptations, and investigate sustainability through longitudinal and comparative studies.

Taken together, the results of this study affirm that PBIS has significant potential to disrupt exclusionary discipline patterns, but its success depends on consistent implementation, systemic support, and intentional focus on equity. By addressing the challenges identified by teachers and pursuing the research directions recommended here, educators, leaders, and policymakers can strengthen PBIS as a tool for creating more inclusive and just school environments. Ultimately, these efforts can move schools closer to dismantling the preschool-to-prison pipeline and ensure that all students, particularly African American students disproportionately affected by exclusionary practices, experience fair, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Invite

Subject: Share Your Experience: PBIS & Student Success Research Study

I am Kayla Fouse, a fellow preschool teacher and prospective doctoral candidate at National University. I am conducting a research study to explore teachers' perspectives on PBIS effectiveness in disrupting the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

I am seeking preschool teachers with experience implementing PBIS to share their insights through a 45-minute interview (via Zoom or in person) and a classroom observation. Your voice is invaluable in understanding how PBIS impacts school discipline and student outcomes.

Key Details:

Who: Preschool teachers that have used PBIS for at least 1 full school year

What: A one-on-one interview (~45 minutes) and classroom observation

When: At your convenience

Where: Virtual (Zoom) or in person

Confidentiality: Responses will be anonymized

If you're interested, please sign up here:

For questions, feel free to contact me at k.fouse5795@o365.ncu.edu. Thank you for considering participation. I truly appreciate your time and expertise.

Best,
Kayla Fouse
National University

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Study Title: *Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) for Title 1 Schools*
Researcher: Kayla Fouse
Institution: National University
Contact Information: K.fouse5795@o365.ncu.edu
Purpose of Study
You are invited to participate in a research study that examines how teachers perceive the effectiveness of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and their observations of disciplinary practices affecting African American students.
Participation and Procedures

- If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview (~45-60 minutes).
- Some participants may also be observed implementing PBIS strategies in their classrooms (~45 minutes per session, 2-3 sessions).
- Interviews will be audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed for analysis.

Your participation is **completely voluntary**. You may **refuse** to answer any question or withdraw at any time **without consequences**.

Confidentiality & Data Security

- All information you provide will remain **confidential**.
- Your name and school will be replaced with **pseudonyms** in all published results.
- Data will be stored on a **password-protected** device and deleted after [X] years.

Potential Risks & Benefits

- There are **minimal risks** associated with this study. However, discussing discipline policies may bring up personal experiences. You may skip any questions that make you uncomfortable.
- This study aims to contribute to **improving PBIS implementation**, which may benefit teachers and students in the long run.

Questions & Contact Information

If you have any questions, feel free to contact **Kayla Fouse at K.fouse5795@o365.ncu.edu**.

For concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact **[Institutional Review Board (IRB) Contact Information]**.

Consent Statement

☐ I agree to participate in this study.
☐ I consent to being audio-recorded.
☐ I consent to being observed in my classroom.

Participant Name (Printed): _____
Participant Signature: _____
Date: _____

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Appendix C

Inclusion Questionnaire

Are you a preschool teacher?
What is your highest level of education? (some college, AA, BA, MA, or higher)
What permit, if any, do you hold? (Associate teacher, Teacher, Master teacher, Site Supervisor, Director)
Have you been implementing PBIS at least 1 full year school?
What is your role in PBIS implementation? (Teacher, PBIS team member, Administrator, Counselor)

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Study Title: *Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) for Title 1 Schools*
Interviewer: Kayla Fouse
Date: [Interview Date]
Participant Code: [Assign ID for Anonymity]
Interview Format: In-person / Zoom (Specify)
"Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I want to remind you that this interview is voluntary, and you can choose not to answer any question or stop at any time. Your responses will remain confidential. With your permission, I will be recording this interview to ensure accuracy. Do I have your consent to proceed and record?"

1. How effective do you believe PBIS is in improving student behavior in your classroom? (Likert scale: 1-not at all effective, 3-neutral, 5-highly effective)
2. In what ways do you feel PBIS has impacted overall classroom management and discipline?
3. Do you feel that PBIS has led to a reduction in exclusionary discipline (expulsion, suspension, referrals)?
4. Do you believe PBIS is implemented equitably for all students in your school?
5. How well does PBIS support students with diverse needs (eg: special education, English language learners, students from low-income backgrounds)? (Likert scale: 1-poorly, 3-neutral, 5-exceptionally well)
6. What modifications, if any, do you think should be made to PBIS to make it more inclusive?
7. How do students generally respond to PBIS interventions and reward systems? (Likert scale: 1-not positively, 3-neutral, 5-very positively)
8. What are the biggest challenges you face in implementing PBIS in your classroom? (Lack of training, inconsistent application, time constraints, lack of administrative support, student resistance, other [please specify])
9. Do you feel you have received adequate training and professional development on PBIS?
10. What additional resources or support would help improve PBIS implementation in your class?
11. What changes would you recommend to improve PBIS in your department?
12. How would you redesign PBIS to better support students and teachers?

Appendix E

Observation Criteria

Tools: Check if materials are accessible (student eye level/accessible to teaching staff)

- Expectations
- Voice volume
- Instructional schedule
- Procedures
- Lesson plan

Instruction: Check if expectations are connected to specific behavior

- 3 Bees (District Wide Expectations: Be Safe, Be respectful, be responsible)
- Gentle hands
- Big voice
- Helping hands
- Listening ears
- Sharing
- Thoughtful choices
- Walking feet
- None

Routines observed:

- Circle
- Arrival/dismissal
- Small group
- Lining up
- Cleaning up
- Free play/open centers
- Hand washing
- Mealtime
- Outside/inclement weather