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Benjamin, Michelle

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Different Strokes, Different Approach:
Are Black Principals Disciplining in Pursuit of Racial Equity?

By

MICHELLE BENJAMIN, M.A.
DISSERTATION

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Approved:

Faheemah N. Mustafaa, Chair

Lawrence Torry Winn

Margarita Jiménez-Silva

Committee in Charge

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the Jayden's and Elijah's of the world, young Black boys who I had the honor of teaching and who forever changed the way I think about and approach discipline, as an educator and administrator.

I also dedicate this work to my family, near and far, those here on Earth and those watching from heaven, whose love, strength, and encouragement have carried me throughout this journey.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to all those in education who serve our youth and strive to make a positive difference through equitable, compassionate, and restorative approaches to discipline.

Abstract

Disproportionate suspension rates for Black students continue to be a concern in education, often beginning in the early elementary grades. While previous research has highlighted these disparities, less is known about how Black principals address discipline and promote equitable practices within their schools. This study examined the lived experiences of Black principals in urban elementary schools in the Sacramento area, their approaches to addressing racial disparities in student discipline and their perspectives on discipline outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, this study explored how Black principals describe their roles in shaping school discipline, strategies they use to support students, and challenges they face when working to reduce disciplinary inequities. Findings indicate that participants draw from formative experiences with racialized discipline to adopt restorative, relationship-centered practices that emphasize accountability, belonging, and care. In contrast to punitive models, their approaches align with culturally responsive leadership frameworks and reflect a commitment to disrupting inequitable disciplinary patterns. While limitations of this study should be considered, the findings underscore a need for systemic policy shifts to prioritize the recruitment and sustained support of Black principals and the integration of culturally responsive leadership and restorative frameworks, such as CRSL and CRPBIS, into educators' preparation, professional development, and districtwide practices.

Keywords: Black elementary principals, school discipline, culturally responsive leadership, restorative practices, educational equity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In historical and contemporary educational contexts alike, the troubling trend of disproportionately high suspension rates among Black and Brown students underscores systemic inequities within the education system. According to the California Department of Education (2024), in the 2022–23 academic year, 3.5% of California students were suspended for at least one day. Yet, suspension rates for Black or African American students have reached nearly 9%, and nearly 1 in every 10 Black children were suspended that year, a rate significantly higher than that of other racial cohorts (Wood et al., 2018). In Sacramento County, Black students experienced suspension rates of approximately 12.9% in the 2023–24 academic year, significantly higher than rates for their peers (Sacramento County Office of Education [SCOE], 2024). While California Department of Education (2023) reported Black student enrollment in Sacramento City Unified at 11.4%, Black students experienced a 15.3% suspension rate in the 2023-24 academic year, significantly higher than other groups. Exclusionary discipline remains a critical equity concern in this district, where racialized disparities are particularly pronounced in early childhood education; Black boys in kindergarten through third grade are six times more likely to be suspended than their same-grade counterparts (Wood et al., 2018). Such data highlight pervasive challenges for those who seek to create and experience equitable and inclusive school environments.

To address the disproportionate disciplinary practices affecting Black students, it is crucial to examine the role of school leaders and their perceptions of student misbehavior (Welsh & Sobti, 2023). School leaders play a vital role in fostering safe and inclusive learning

environments, influencing student and adult interactions, engaging with families, empowering staff, and establishing behavioral expectations. Research suggests that Black principals uniquely contribute to the success of Black students by employing culturally responsive practices, drawing on shared educational experiences, and maintaining high expectations (Welsh & Sobti, 2023). Black principals can play a pivotal role in addressing disciplinary inequities in schools serving Black students. Dual perspective, as educational leaders and as individuals who deeply understand the cultural contexts of Black students, enables these leaders to navigate systemic inequities while fostering inclusivity (Sobti & Welsh, 2023). However, such efforts often require them to balance institutional objectives with the urgent need to address racial disparities in practices and outcomes of discipline.

A pressing question thus arises: *Are Black principals implementing alternative behavioral interventions, such as restorative justice, to mitigate these issues and promote equity* (Agudelo et al., 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2008)? Exploring the lived experiences of Black principals who utilize various disciplinary approaches may be pivotal in shaping a more equitable educational system. Such research can potentially dismantle systemic barriers, ultimately benefiting all students.

This study examines the experiences of urban Black principals in California in response to the disproportionately high suspension rates in urban schools across the state. Exclusionary discipline policies have been shown to disproportionately affect Black and Brown students, contributing to long-standing racial disparities in school discipline (Peterson, 2021). During the 2024–25 school year, students of color represented approximately 80% of California’s K–12 student population (California Department of Education [CDE], 2024). However, Black principals accounted for only 3.8% of school leaders nationwide, highlighting a persistent gap in

representation and educational leadership (NCES, 2021). Given these disparities and the broader context of California's urban education system, this research seeks to understand the gap in research between how Black principals navigate these challenges and address disciplinary inequities within California urban elementary schools.

Black Principals

There is an urgent need for additional research on Black school leaders' (principals') role and experience in the disciplinary process, and their impact on school discipline policies and racial disparities in exclusionary discipline (Welsh & Sobti, 2023). This area of study is essential, particularly given the societal pressures Black and Brown students face from an early age. Schools should serve as sanctuaries for these students, especially in a society grappling with systemic anti-Black racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, and economic inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Examining the heterogeneity and diversity of Black principals' approaches to addressing discipline could significantly shift school-level disciplinary practices and perceptions.

Given the systemic issues surrounding inequitable disciplinary practices in education, this research examines the strategies employed by Black principals to address these disparities and promote equitable school environments. Existing literature on Black principals often connects their leadership to themes of student achievement, equity, and culturally responsive leadership (Lomotey, 2019). However, the extent to which a principal's race influences disciplinary practices remains underexplored. Historical data demonstrate that race is a critical factor in student disciplinary decisions and for the principals who hold significant power in shaping students' educational trajectories (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Since much of the existing scholarship on school leadership centers on White leaders, there is a notable gap in

understanding the perspectives and practices of Black principals (Welsh & Sobti, 2023).

Addressing this gap is vital, given that the disproportionately high suspension rates among Black students are linked not only to systemic biases but also to the lack of diversity in educational leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2017).

Khalifa and colleagues (2016) indicate that disciplinary disparities often originate in the classroom, emphasizing the importance of understanding how Black principals address this inequity. As school leaders, Black principals shape the disciplinary culture of their schools and play a crucial role in fostering equitable environments. By providing teachers with resources for culturally relevant classrooms and curricula, Black principals help ensure that all students feel included in the school community (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Despite mounting evidence demonstrating the ineffectiveness of punitive disciplinary measures, a “get tough” approach to school discipline persists due to deep entrenchment in societal norms (Mansfield et al., 2018). However, a shift toward restorative practices has emerged as a promising alternative. Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) theory emphasizes the importance of school leaders valuing and understanding the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students and communities (Johnson, 2007). This approach emphasizes equity and inclusivity, providing a framework for addressing discriminatory disciplinary practices through restorative justice initiatives (Agudelo et al., 2021). School administrators play a crucial role in creating inclusive environments and guiding educators to do the same. To address disciplinary needs equitably, culturally competent leadership involves learning and embracing diversity within the community to promote overall student success through continuous improvement of practices (Minkos et al., 2017).

Principals who adopt CRSL practices may also implement culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports (CRPBIS), a framework that views student behavior through a culturally informed lens (Bal, 2018). CRPBIS promotes proactive, solution-focused strategies that unite school leaders, educators, and students to collaboratively set goals for resolving conflicts. These restorative practices align with CRSL principles, with the goal of fostering more equitable disciplinary outcomes (Mansfield et al., 2018). While Bal (2018) has explored the implementation of positive behavioral interventions, CRPBIS, and CRSL, there is still a lack of conclusive evidence regarding the connection between these practices and reducing disciplinary disparities for Black students. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that these approaches have transformative potential. For example, under my leadership as a Black principal, the suspension rate for Black and Brown students dropped dramatically, from 77 suspensions in one year to just two per year, because we implemented restorative practices, approaches, and accountability frameworks. These encouraging results highlight the critical role of Black principals in the quest to promote equitable disciplinary practices.

Research Questions

This study examines how Black principals' lived experiences and leadership practices influence disciplinary disparities. By reviewing their educational experiences, this research aims to understand how these influences shape their leadership approaches, particularly in addressing disciplinary inequities. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following primary research question: *How do the lived experiences of Black principals in urban elementary schools influence their approaches to addressing racial disparities in student discipline?* And my focal sub-question is: *What are Black principals' perspectives on student discipline outcomes?* This qualitative inquiry aims to uncover valuable insights regarding the disciplinary practices and

perspectives of Black principals, offering deeper understanding of their efforts to create inclusive and equitable school cultures.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Among the myriad approaches to address persistent disparities in school disciplinary outcomes, alternative methods such as culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports (CRPBIS) have emerged as promising tools for fostering more equitable and constructive school environments (Banks & Obiakor, 2015). This literature review synthesizes research on these practices and highlights the critical role of Black principals in addressing discipline disparities, as members themselves of communities disproportionately affected by racialized discipline disparities and the school-to-prison pipeline. While some scholars (e.g., Edwards et al., 2023) argue that a principal's race does not necessarily influence discipline rates—as students of color have historically been disciplined at disproportionately high rates by Black and White principals alike—exploring how Black principals can leverage their lived experiences to foster equitable discipline practices remains vital. Black principals rooted in culturally responsive leadership, for example, offer valuable insights into how disciplinary approaches can honor and align with students' varied cultural backgrounds and experiences. This review thus examines the literature on and interplay between Black principals' lived experiences and culturally responsive leadership principles related to discipline disparities, discussing disparities in discipline, the role of Black principals in elementary schools, counterstories, culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports, and culturally responsive school leadership.

Disparities in Discipline

The disproportionate disciplining of Black students often creates a racial divide within schools, with many Black students reporting feelings of being unfairly targeted (Bell, 2020). Bell cites Gibson and colleagues' 2014 finding that Black students perceive additional disciplinary scrutiny due to their race. Many students of color remain very racially segregated, and also encounter an institutional framework of Whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 1998) that disproportionately penalizes Black students for failing to meet obedience expectations (Bell, 2020). *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (n.d.) defines discipline as “the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior using punishment to correct disobedience.” Because dominant forms of discipline in U.S. schools are punitive—characterized by low tolerance for behavioral infractions that results in out-of-school suspensions or expulsions—disciplined students often miss significant instructional time. This outcome has been shown to increase a student's likelihood of dropping out and becoming entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline (Roch & Elsayed, 2020).

The school-to-prison pipeline, driven by punitive disciplinary mindsets and policies, disproportionately affects Black and Brown students in ways that mirror the racial composition of the prison population (Mallet, 2016). Punitive frameworks take shape as a pipeline, reinforced by partnerships between schools and the juvenile justice system, that dis-advantages and harms vulnerable children and adolescents (Agudelo et al., 2021). In many schools with higher Black and Brown student populations, students are more statistically likely to experience criminal involvement with juvenile court than attain a quality education. The criminalization of Black students reflected in their comparative over-discipline can create a racialized cycle of bias

(Agudelo et al., 2021). Importantly, Roch and Elsayed (2020) suggest that Black students may face comparative over-discipline *regardless* of the race of the administrator.

Within California’s education system, Black students have historically been disproportionately suspended in both elementary and secondary schools (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). During the 2017–18 school year, Black students:

- accounted for 38.8% of expulsions, 38.2% of out-of-school suspensions, and 31.4% of in-school suspensions; and
- were expelled at the highest rate of any student group; one in eight Black students (12%) received one or more out-of-school suspensions (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022).

Yet, Black student enrollment was only 15.1%. (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). These are data points driving my research around Black principals today who are being intentional about efforts to establish restorative, rather than punitive, disciplinary practices, policies, and outcomes. I seek specifically to shed light on whether Black principals’ approaches to discipline can help address a systemic inequity and narrow the discipline gap, particularly in schools with large Black student populations (Marvel & Resh, 2015).

Equity in School Discipline: The Impact and Role of Black School Leaders

School leaders play a crucial role in maintaining school discipline, fostering a positive overall school environment, and driving policy changes that can influence racialized dynamics of harm (Edwards et al., 2023). As a result of the *Brown* ruling, between 1954 and 1965 more than 38,000 Black educators in 17 Southern states were “dismissed” from their positions, so Black students had to transition into predominantly White schools, with White teachers and administrators (Tillman, 2004). Even today, only 6% of U.S. teachers, and an even smaller

percentage of Black administrators, are Black, despite Black students comprising 15% of the student population (Lambert, 2024).

Lomotey (2019) has demonstrated that Black principals can positively influence the academic and social experiences of Black students, noting that shared cultural and educational experiences can foster a more inclusive discipline system. Indeed, the presence of teachers of color has been shown to enhance Black students' perceptions of education, and culturally relevant pedagogy to validate students' cultural identities, while/by inviting them into conversations around discipline that can foster sense of belonging within the school community (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). More recently, Roch and Elsayed (2020) suggest that racial alignment between teachers and students is associated with fewer suspensions and disciplinary sanctions for students of color.

The nexus between race and disciplinary practices through the lens of Black school leaders prompts reflection on whether decision-making processes adequately consider the perspectives and experiences of students of color (Welsh & Sobti, 2023) and valuable insights into how leadership can drive systemic change. Edwards and colleagues (2023) have shown that Black *and* White principals in a Texas elementary school district administered disciplinary actions to Black students in all grades at similar rates; that is, a Black student with a Black school leader was still more likely than a White student with a White principal to receive disciplinary consequences. These findings raise questions about whether Black principals may feel pressured by systemic norms or external expectations to impose harsher discipline on Black students, particularly in predominantly White suburban and rural schools or districts (Brockenbrough, 2015). Additional research is needed to determine whether Black principals are

administering comparatively harsh discipline sanctions to impart harsh lessons to Black students, and how this may negatively impact all stakeholders involved.

Scholarship already points to how the gender of Black principals influences their leadership styles and disciplinary practices. Bass' (2020) survey findings, for example, reveal that Black male school leaders' expressions of care are often misinterpreted and deeply rooted in their experiences as Black men; they often battle societal pressure to mask their own sensitivities and practice "tough love" that aligns culturally with their students' experiences, to gain trust and respect. Lomotey (2019a), on the other hand, shows that Black female principals often express a nurturing, mothering, and culturally responsive type of leadership. Other findings suggest that Black female students report more supportive relationships with Black female teachers/leaders identified as "other mothers," in that they take on a parental role for Black female students, with intention (Offutt-Chaney, 2023). Gendered leadership style patterns offer valuable perspectives regarding how Black principals may build relationships and navigate discipline—with both named approaches pointing to the potential for culturally responsive leadership to create a more equitable and supportive school environment.

Studies of Black leaders' leadership qualities and cultural implications have highlighted how their presence can provide alternative perspectives on student relationships and views of schools (Khalifa, 2015). The concept of homophily, the tendency for individuals to connect with those who share similar backgrounds, beliefs, and values, further supports the importance of Black leadership in schools (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Black principals are still disproportionately underrepresented, in comparison to the proportion of Black students, and this may indirectly impact racialized suspension rates. The role of Black principals in addressing school discipline is a critical area of inquiry because these leaders have potential to leverage their

shared cultural and lived experiences to build stronger relationships with students of color, establishing and deepening dynamics of trust and belonging that can transform school environments and promote racial equity. Existing literature on Black principals' lived experiences, culturally relevant pedagogy, and alternative strategies, such as restorative practices, provide insight regarding the need for more Black principals and the pursuit of equity in addressing racialized disciplinary disparities.

Counterstories

During the 1970s, scholars like Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado developed critical race theory (CRT) in response to the civil rights movement's inability to address systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT reasons that racism is ingrained within the foundation of American society, not a collection of isolated incidents often told in history books. Counterstories—individual and personal narratives that counteract these dominant societal stories by revealing the lived experiences of those often marginalized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—are a key component of CRT (Miller et al., 2020). By highlighting the voices of marginalized individuals and groups, counterstories expose the shortcomings and biases inherent in dominant narratives that typically reflect White, middle-class individuals' experiences and value systems. Counter-narratives provide a more nuanced and richer understanding of societal realities and how systemic racism and forms of oppression manifest in everyday life (Matsuda, 1987). Through counterstories, marginalized individuals can assert their voice while advocating for and challenging stereotypes often perpetuated by the dominant culture. Counterstories related to education can play a crucial role in exposing systemic biases and promoting social justice. They highlight how educational policies and practices are inequitable toward students of color, offering understandings that can lead to more equitable solutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate,

1995). Black principals' counterstories provide insight into their own experiences with school discipline, as former students and present-day administrators in a system that disproportionately affects Black students (Skiba et al., 2014), and incorporating these counter-narratives into policy discussions might inform and accelerate work to create more inclusive and equitable school environments.

Counterstories serve as a form of resistance against dominant discourses that often silence minority voices, empowering individuals from marginalized groups to articulate their experiences and perspectives, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective identity (Delgado, 1989). Such empowerment is crucial for individuals who share their stories and for the broader community, because it creates conditions and invitations to build a more inclusive and equitable society (Delgado, 1989). Black principals' perspectives on school discipline may differ from current and dominant narratives surrounding school discipline and justice, and their counterstories may reveal implicit biases and systemic inequities that shape disciplinary mindsets and practices in and outside of schools. In one study on alternative discipline practices, Black principals were more likely than their White peers to adopt restorative justice practices, preferring to focus on building community rather than imposing punitive punishments (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Restorative practices may better align with the cultural experiences and goals of the many Black educators who advocate for more empathetic and equitable approaches to discipline (Howard, 2014). Black principals' stories may also offer on-ramps and connections between Black students and discipline, including valuable insights into the cultural misunderstandings that often contribute to implicit biases and disciplinary disparities.

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports (CRPBIS) are an alternate means of dealing with discipline and provide different strategies to create a school culture with more positive staff and student relationships, especially transformative when experienced by Black students (Bal, 2018). Principals implementing CRPBIS through strategies like restorative justice can shift school culture around classroom structure, teacher–student relations, and biases associated with discipline disparities.

An adaptation of the traditional positive behavioral intervention support (PBIS) framework (Banks & Obiakor, 2015), CRPBIS is structured to address the cultural discrepancies and needs of diverse student populations. CRPBIS incorporates principles of cultural appropriateness into the PBIS framework to ensure equitable and effective behavior support practices for all students, especially those from marginalized and underserved communities (Bal, 2018). This approach centers understanding of and respect for students' backgrounds and identities, highlighting how traditional disciplinary methods created the dominant group's cultural norms—which have not always been effective or fair for all students.

The goal of CRPBIS is to foster an inclusive school environment by incorporating students' cultural values and norms into behavior support strategies. Traditional PBIS frameworks often overlook the cultural contexts that influence student behavior. For instance, Black students are frequently disciplined for behaviors labeled as “defiance” or “disrespect” that may stem from cultural differences in communication styles and norms (Skiba et al., 2014). CRPBIS addresses these disparities by promoting culturally responsive support systems to ensure equitable disciplinary practices.

Whereas traditional disciplinary approaches often use punitive measures, like suspensions, that do not address the underlying causes of behaviors of concern, CRPBIS focuses on strategies to address root causes, which are sometimes cultural misunderstandings and systemic inequities (Sugai et al., 2012). Black principals committed to equity and cultural responsiveness can implement CRPBIS strategies effectively using their own experiences and counterstories (Sugai et al., 2012). Through counterstories, for example, they can stress the importance of culturally responsive practices and advocate for changes in school discipline practices and policies. Black principals can also play a crucial role in successfully implementing CRPBIS since their unique cultural experiences and perspectives lend them to understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by Black and other students of color (DeMatthews, 2016). Using their cultural knowledge and experience, Black principals can serve as advocates for implementing behavior support strategies that are culturally responsive and equitable. One strategy is training staff to recognize their biases in/and discipline-related interactions with Black students (DeMatthews, 2016).

Through the CRPBIS approach, improved behavioral outcomes can happen for all students, including students of color, via a more inclusive and relationship-centered school atmosphere. Gregory and colleagues (2017) have shown that students who feel heard and respected are more likely to want to participate positively in their education, resulting in fewer interactions with discipline practices. Thus, CRPBIS, including and perhaps especially under the leadership of Black principals, has great potential for shifting school discipline practices toward just and fair experiences and outcomes for all students.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Understanding how leaders promote culturally relevant classrooms and school environments also impacts teachers' roles within the school and the classroom (Khalifa et al., 2016). Effective culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) requires not just leadership but transformative leadership and social justice (Khalifa et al., 2016). Additionally, CRSL ensures that marginalized and underrepresented students are heard and their cultures acknowledged. Punitive discipline has been known to contribute to the oppression of Black students, often having them either leave the classrooms or school grounds, which impacts their education (Khalifa, 2018). Principals and other school leaders immersed and open to learning the cultural differences within their school community can uplift students and overall school culture, helping mitigate the oppressions that many students of color face (Khalifa, 2015).

CRSL involves complementary strategies to create an inclusive school environment, including maintaining high expectations and rigorous instruction, continuous critical self-reflection, and building strong family and community connections (Khalia et al., 2016). An inclusive school culture values students' diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging and respect. Rigorous instruction is essential for addressing opportunity/achievement gaps while ensuring that all students receive the high-quality education they deserve. Continuous critical self-reflection allows leaders to mitigate their own biases in decision making. Strong family and community connections extend the school's efforts beyond the classroom, creating a support network (Khalifa et al., 2016).

For Black principals, critical self-awareness is vital to culturally responsive school leadership, especially when managing school discipline. With self-awareness, Black principals can understand their cultural identity, biases, and biases for how these factors influence their

leadership practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). This self-awareness is also crucial in recognizing and addressing the systemic biases that often lead to disproportionate disciplinary actions against Black students. In reflecting on their lived experiences, Black principals often adopt a more empathetic and equitable approach to discipline involving culturally responsive and restorative lenses (Khalifa, 2018). This reflective practice also allows them to implement discipline policies that are fair and just, promoting a positive school climate and reducing racial disparities in school discipline (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Moreover, discipline policies that honor all students' cultural backgrounds can foster a more inclusive educational environment. As such, CRSL should be discussed and introduced during teacher preparation programs, and school leaders should support it and take responsibility to ensure that teachers and students alike have opportunities to discuss discipline practices and policies.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Brown and Black students continue to face disproportionately high suspension rates, a persistent issue in K–12 education (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2021). My research seeks to explore whether the presence of Black principals at school sites can help mitigate these racial disciplinary disparities. Specifically, I aim to examine how Black principals' disciplinary philosophies align with frameworks such as culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports (CRPBIS) and culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). This study will assess how Black principals incorporate these frameworks (described in Chapter 2) into their disciplinary practices and whether such strategies contribute to reducing racial disparities in school discipline.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of CRSL and CRPBIS

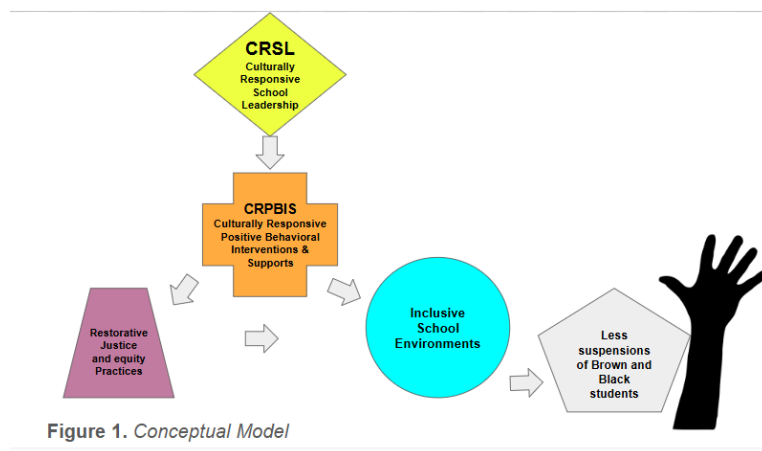


Figure 1 illustrates how discipline approaches through CRSL and CRPBIS models can promote cultural responsiveness in addressing student behavior. These frameworks emphasize restorative justice, building relationships, and repairing harm, rather than punitive measures

(González, 2012), thereby aiming for student discipline outcome equity. By adopting equity-focused practices, schools can create inclusive environments where students feel valued and respected, which research has shown can reduce the disproportionate suspension rates of Black and Brown students (Skiba et al., 2014). Furthermore, culturally responsive leadership practices foster stronger teacher–student relationships and enhance students’ sense of belonging, leading to improved behavioral outcomes (Gay, 2010).

Figure 2. Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework

 Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework	
Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors	Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers
- Is committed to continuous learning of cultural knowledge and contexts (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006) - Displays a critical consciousness on practice in and out of school; displays self-reflection (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Johnson, 2006) - Uses school data and indicants to measure CRSL (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004) - Uses parent/community voices to measure cultural responsiveness in schools (Ishimaru, 2013; Smyth, 2006) - Challenges Whiteness and hegemonic epistemologies in school (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011) - Using equity audits to measure student inclusiveness, policy, and practice (Skrla et al., 2004) - Leading with courage (Khalifa, 2011; Nee-Benham, Maenette, & Cooper, 1988) - Is a transformative leader for social justice and inclusion? (Alston, 2005; Gooden, 2005; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Shields, 2010)	- Developing teacher capacities for culturally responsive pedagogy (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003) - Collaborative walkthroughs (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) - Creating culturally responsive PD opportunities for teachers (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Voltz et al., 2003) - Using school data to see cultural gaps in achievement, discipline, enrichment, and remedial services (Skrla et al., 2004) - Creating a CRSL team that is charged with constantly finding new ways for teachers to be culturally responsive (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006) - Engaging/reforming the school curriculum to become more culturally responsive (Sleeter, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) - Modeling culturally responsive teaching (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) - Using culturally responsive assessment tools for students (Hopson, 2001; Kea, Campbell-Whitley, & Bratton, 2003)
Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment	Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts
- Accepting indigenized, local identities (Khalifa, 2010) - Building relationships; reducing anxiety among students (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) - Modeling CRSL for staff in building interactions (Khalifa, 2011; Tillman, 2005) - Promoting a vision for an inclusive instructional and behavioral practices (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Webb-Johnson, 2006; Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007) - If need be, challenging exclusionary policies, teachers, and behaviors (Khalifa, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) - Acknowledges, values, and uses Indigenous cultural and social capital of students (Khalifa, 2010, 2012) - Uses student voice (Antrop-González, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) - Using school data to discover and track disparities in academic and disciplinary trends (Skiba et al., 2002; Skrla et al., 2004; Theoharis, 2007)	- Developing meaningful, positive relationships with community (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Walker, 2001) - Is a servant leader, as public intellectual and other roles (Alston, 2005; Gooden, 2005; Johnson, 2006) - Finding overlapping spaces for school and community (Cooper, 2009; Ishimaru, 2013; Khalifa, 2012) - Serving as advocate and social activist for community-based causes in both the school and neighborhood community (Capper, Hafner, & Keyes, 2002; Gooden, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa, 2012) (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006) - Resists deficit images of students and families (Davis, 2002; Flessa, 2009) - Uses the community as an informative space from which to develop positive understandings of students and families - Nurturing/caring for others; sharing information (Gooden, 2005; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) - Connecting directly with students (Gooden, 2005; Khalifa, 2012; Lomotey, 1993)

Muhammad Khalifa, Ohio State University | Mark Anthony Gooden, Columbia University | James Earl Davis, Temple University

Note. Reprinted from Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework, by M. Khalifa, M. A. Gooden, & J. E. Davis (2016),

CRSL Institute, www.odu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/crsl-framework.pdf.

Figure 2 outlines the core components of CRSL, critical self-reflection and fostering inclusive school environments, which align with CRPBIS strategies. Critical self-reflection requires school leaders to examine their biases and how these influence school culture and discipline (Khalifa et al., 2016). Through their lived experiences and positionality, Black principals are uniquely positioned to engage in this reflective practice via counterstories—narratives that challenge dominant perspectives—to provide insights into the racialized experiences of Black students and address systemic disparities in discipline policies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

By integrating CRSL and CRPBIS, Black principals can promote a sense of belonging for all students through equitable discipline and restorative justice practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). CRPBIS ensures that behavioral interventions are culturally responsive and constructive, addressing the root causes of behavior rather than resorting to punitive measures (Sugai et al., 2012). Schools led by Black principals who adopt these frameworks have demonstrated lower suspension rates for Black and Brown students, as these leaders prioritize relationship building and addressing systemic inequities (Skiba et al., 2014). Research highlights that Black principals who tend to implement restorative practices are committed to fostering supportive and inclusive school cultures, positively impacting student learning outcomes (Branch et al., 2013). These leaders address systemic issues by advocating for equitable opportunities and incorporating students' cultural identities into the school-wide environment. They also engage families and communities, pushing for broader societal changes to reduce inequities (Johnson, 2007). Culturally competent leadership involves continuous learning, embracing diversity, and promoting student success through ongoing improvement of school practices (Minkos et al., 2017).

Through this study, I aim to capture the voices of Black principals whose lived experiences inform their use of CRSL and CRPBIS frameworks. Their insights can inform the restructuring of disciplinary practices and policies, ensuring that Black students receive equitable treatment. Schools led by Black principals employing these frameworks stand to benefit from their expertise around fostering discipline, equity, and inclusive learning environments at the school and district levels.

Chapter 4: Methods

In this chapter, I outline my research questions, study setting, participants, data collection methods, and positionality. My qualitative approach provided Black principals a platform to share their voices, offering more profound insights into their unique experiences with disciplinary disparities. Thus, I ensured that their perspectives were heard and contextualized, addressing the complexities of their roles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study aimed to amplify the voices of Black principals, enabling them to share their perspectives on discipline and its relationship to equity. I focused on this research question and sub-question: *How do the lived experiences of Black principals in urban elementary schools influence their approaches to addressing racial disparities in student discipline? What are Black principals' perspectives on student discipline outcomes?*

Information was gathered around (1) the educational journeys of Black principals within the Sacramento, California area and their views on discipline; (2) strategies Black principals are implementing to address disciplinary disparities and increase racial equity practices on their campus; and (3) challenges Black principals may face in their efforts to adopt strategies around discipline. A qualitative approach for this research was used to allow participants to offer their perspectives and reflect on their unique situations with disparities in discipline (Merriam, 2009). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved this study.

Setting and Recruitment

This study was conducted with Black principals based in urban elementary schools within the Sacramento County area, utilizing semi-structured interviews. As a Black principal working within an urban elementary school, I was interested in learning about the disciplinary

perspectives and approaches of other Black principals working with similar demographics. I reached out to the California Association of African American Administrators and individuals in my network using snowball sampling. I recruited participants through emails in a listserv for school administrators based on the following criteria: principals who identify as Black and work with discipline in inner-city public elementary schools within Sacramento County.

The first step of data collection in the recruitment process began with a demographic screening questionnaire (Appendix A), distributed through email in Spring/Summer 2025. The questionnaire collected age, years of experience, ethnic identity, and disciplinary roles. I received responses from 13 prospective administrators from various school districts within Sacramento. Of the 13 principal inquiry respondents, only 10 participated in the interview process, mainly due to availability within the summer hours.

Participants who participated also became involved via purposeful sampling to ensure representation across gender and direct involvement in elementary school discipline, as well as availability to complete one interview. This approach not only supported my focus on the influence of Black leadership in discipline practices but also ensured the collection of rich, nuanced data aligned with the study's aims to understand Black principals' perspectives on discipline through lived experiences.

A total of ten participants were interviewed for this study, with a range of years of experience, all identifying as Black and either female or male (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants Interviewed

Pseudonym	Gender	Years in Education	Current Role
ALove	Female	16+ years	Principal
VP	Male	6–10 years	Assistant Principal
Drad	Female	16+ years	Assistant Principal, Principal
Cam	Male	16+ years	Principal
JW	Female	16+ years	Retired Principal
Mas	Male	16+ years	Principal
West Coast	Male	6-10 years	Principal
DL	Male	16+ years	Retired Principal
FloMo	Male	6-10 years	Principal
Major	Male	6-10 years	Vice Principal

Data Collection

The second step in the data collection process involved semi-structured interviews during the Summer of 2025. The interview protocol (Appendix B) was designed to resemble a natural conversation, encouraging participants to speak candidly and in their authentic voice, a practice aligned with qualitative research principles that prioritize the lived experiences of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for about 10 probing questions that explored how Black principals’ perceptions of school discipline were shaped and whether they perceived existing systems as supportive or obstructive in addressing racial disparities in disciplinary actions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Semi-

structured interviews enable in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, including their childhood educational experiences and how these experiences inform their current disciplinary practices. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom, depending on participants' availability and preferences. While in-person interviews offered a personal touch, virtual interviews ensured broader participation.

Interviews for this study were recorded and later transcribed while maintaining confidentiality. Utilizing Zoom as a virtual platform allowed for high-quality audio recordings and ease of scheduling, which was particularly important given the demanding responsibilities of school administrators (Archibald et al., 2019). The interviews were transcribed using the professional software, Sonix, tailored to the mode of data collection. In-person interviews were transcribed using Sonix, a secure and reliable transcription platform, while Zoom's embedded transcription feature was utilized for virtual interviews. All interview transcripts were checked for accuracy, and all transcription files and corresponding data were stored in encrypted, password protected folders to uphold the confidentiality and security of participant information. In alignment with ethical research practices, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and professional standing further, and this precaution was clearly communicated during the informed consent process. These measures reflect a commitment to safeguarding participants' privacy while promoting trust and transparency throughout the research process. To recognize the value of participants' time and contributions, each received a \$25 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is an iterative and interpretive process that involves identifying patterns and themes across participants' responses to construct meaning from their

lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, analysis was guided by the central research question: *How do the lived experiences of Black principals in urban elementary schools influence their approaches to addressing racial disparities in student discipline?* NVivo qualitative analysis software served as a key tool to support this process by helping organize, code, and retrieve data systematically. NVivo provided an electronic environment for me to manually code participants' interview transcripts, organize emerging patterns, and visually map relationships among categories and themes. I utilized NVivo qualitative analysis software to help me systematically code and organize data from the interview transcripts.

To conduct the analysis for this study, I engaged in a multi-stage qualitative process designed to ensure rigor, transparency, and alignment with the research questions. First, I prepared and verified the primary data—ten Zoom-recorded interviews—by transcribing them through the platform's automated tool, printing each transcript, and conducting line-by-line corrections to establish an initial audit trail and support dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following each interview, I also wrote analytic memos capturing early reflections, deductive links to the central research question, and inductive insights from participants' narratives; those memos were distilled into within-case thematic summaries. Each summary consists of key patterns regarding participants' lived experiences, illustrative excerpts from interview transcripts, and preliminary interpretations that highlight how individual perspectives shaped approaches to leadership, discipline, and equity. Next, I entered these summaries into an Excel matrix to compare cases, color-coded overlapping ideas to generate an initial set of codes. I then imported the color-coded matrix into NVivo to organize, visualize, and refine relationships among categories, reducing seven preliminary categories into three higher-order themes while retaining outlier details for vignette development (see the Findings chapter). Finally, I iteratively returned

to the original transcripts to verify and refine theme labels, ensuring that the final themes, situated within CRSL and CRPBIS frameworks, were grounded in the data through a transparent, reflexive blend of deductive and inductive reasoning. Each of the stages is further explained below.

After each interview, I read the cleaned transcript closely and followed with an analytic memo capturing my early reflections, potential connections to the research questions, and notable participant-specific ideas. This memo process served two purposes: I deductively attended to segments directly relevant to the study's central questions about leadership, equity, and discipline; and I inductively paid attention to new or unexpected ideas that emerged organically in participants' narratives. These early memos allowed the analysis to remain reflexive and created an initial record of my interpretive thinking before more formal coding steps.

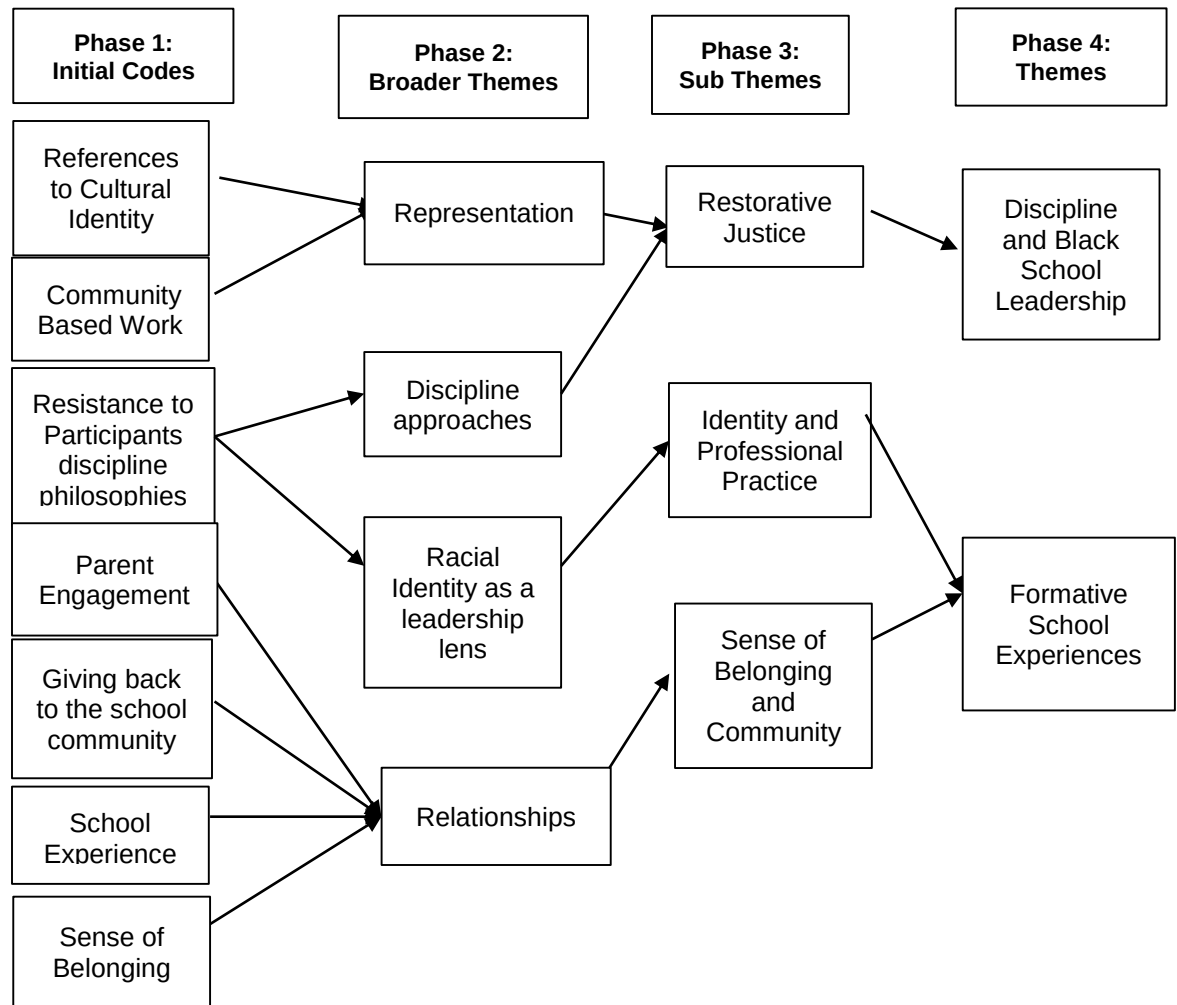
Next, each participant's memo notes were condensed into an initial set of within-case thematic codes (for example, "references to cultural identity," "community-based work," or "parent engagement"). These thematic codes were not excerpts but were my analytic distillations of the participant's key points. All thematic codes were entered into a single Excel matrix, with each participant occupying one column and each memo-derived thematic code placed in rows. This matrix provided a structured way to examine similarities and differences across participants and served as an intermediate analytic artifact before theme generation. As Figure 3 illustrates, this stage corresponds to the initial codes found in the table, where descriptive, participant-centered codes begin to accumulate. The matrix was reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring themes across participants. Thematic codes that overlapped or reflected similar experiences were grouped and color-coded to visualize early thematic clusters visually mirroring the process

depicted in Figure 3, in which data gradually condense from many initial codes toward more organized patterns. This phase represented the first attempt at collapsing data into categories while still preserving outlier details that were important for later vignette development. The color-coding helped clarify which ideas were widely shared and which were more context-specific, with initial codes including “giving back to the community,” “school experiences,” “sense of belonging,” “resistance to participants’ discipline philosophies,” and “relationships,” capturing the descriptive-level ideas shown from the initial codes of Figure 3 prior to their later refinement into three higher-order thematic groupings.

The color-coded matrix was imported into NVivo to further organize and refine the developing categories. NVivo’s grouping and visualization tools assisted in examining relationships between clusters and identifying areas of consolidation. Seven preliminary categories were gradually reduced to three higher-order thematic concepts. After the three higher-order themes were identified, I looked back at the original transcripts and the Excel matrix to verify that the three higher-order themes accurately reflected the data set. Theme labels were refined for clarity, but the overall structure remained stable. Unique or non-overlapping items, such as individual schooling histories or family backgrounds, were not discarded but instead incorporated into participant vignettes to maintain context and nuance while still achieving a manageable thematic structure. These cross-checks, along with the documented analytic trail, were implemented to strengthen the study’s credibility. Once the final themes were established, which included Formative School Experiences and Discipline and Black School Leadership, these themes were synthesized, showing connections to CRSL, CRPBIS, and the discipline philosophies guiding Black principals’ leadership approaches.

The overall approach blended deductive and inductive reasoning rather than adhering strictly to a line-by-line coding model. The process moved from broader memo-derived summaries toward more abstract thematic groupings. Although some elements resembled axial coding, the study did not follow a formal grounded theory model; instead, I organized the categories into coherent themes. The iterative movement across memos, matrices, and NVivo outputs ensured that the final themes remained grounded in the data while still allowing for further refinement.

Figure 3. Theme Generation Process



Positionality

As a Black female principal working within an educational system that was not designed for leaders who look like me, my positionality is both deeply personal and central to this research. I approach this study through the lens of critical race theory, which asserts that racism is a permanent and systemic feature of American institutions, including public education (Bell, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I have witnessed and experienced firsthand how disciplinary policies and practices disproportionately target Black students, reinforcing deficit-based narratives about their behavior, culture, and potential (Skiba et al., 2002). These inequities are not abstract; they are daily realities in schools like mine, where exclusionary discipline continues to mirror broader social inequities.

My leadership philosophy is grounded in culturally responsive school leadership, emphasizing advocacy, equity, and the disruption of oppressive school systems (Khalifa, 2018). Long before becoming a principal, I embodied these values as a classroom teacher. I often welcomed students who had been labeled “defiant” and “behavior problems,” who by the end of the year no longer needed behavioral contracts. Through relationship building, cultural affirmation, and restorative practices, rather than punishment, I witnessed meaningful transformation in both student behavior and confidence. These experiences shaped my belief that discipline should be restorative, not punitive, and that culturally responsive leadership can serve as a tool for liberation rather than control (Khalifa et al., 2016). This positionality directly informs my inquiry into how other Black principals draw upon their lived experiences to shape discipline philosophies and practices, particularly in ways that challenge traditional, exclusionary models of school discipline. By examining their narratives, this study seeks to understand how

personal histories, racial identity, and leadership commitments intersect and influence equitable disciplinary approaches in elementary school settings.

As a principal, I continue to navigate the racialized realities of leadership. Like many Black school leaders, I am often expected to act as a cultural broker, a disciplinarian, and an equity advocate, all while working within institutional structures not built for my success (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). This tension between institutional expectations and cultural authenticity underscores the urgency of my research. My role requires balancing compliance with district mandates while maintaining a deep commitment to justice-oriented practices that affirm and uplift the students and families I serve. Therefore, my positionality as a Black elementary school principal directly shaped both my connection to the study participants and the design of this research. Sharing similar racial identities and leadership contexts fostered a sense of trust and mutual understanding, allowing participants to engage authentically and openly during interviews. This shared experience informed the formulation of the research questions, which were intentionally designed to elicit how participants' discipline philosophies developed over time and how their lived experiences influenced whether they approach discipline through a restorative, culturally responsive lens. During the analysis process, this positionality also heightened my awareness of the conversational nature of the interviews, as participants were invited to reflect on their identities, leadership journeys, and beliefs. As a result, the interviews often unfolded as reflective conversations rather than structured exchanges, providing rich, nuanced data that deepened my understanding of how Black principals make sense of discipline within racially complex school contexts.

My professional journey into education was not linear. Though I initially pursued a career in medicine, my intrinsic passion for helping children guided me toward teaching nearly a

decade after college. My work with students, especially those considered “troubled” and “written off,” ignited a lifelong dedication to educational equity. My ability to connect with students is rooted in my experiences as a mother, sister, and daughter, and in the community support that nurtured me. These personal and professional experiences motivate my desire to “give back” to the communities that raised and shaped me, grounding my leadership in empathy, advocacy, and cultural pride.

In my role as a researcher, I recognize that my lived experience and positionality inevitably shape my interpretation of data and interactions with participants (Merriam, 2015). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study, I implemented several validation strategies. Peer debriefing engaged colleagues familiar with qualitative research to review transcripts, coding, and analysis for bias and accuracy. Member checking allowed participants to review their interview transcripts to confirm authenticity and meaning. Triangulation further strengthened the study’s rigor by integrating participant narratives with existing scholarship on Black principals and school discipline (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I also acknowledge that my dual identity as a principal and researcher may influence power dynamics within the study. Shared racial identity and leadership experiences can build trust and foster open dialogue, and may also introduce assumptions or expectations. To navigate this, I approached each interview reflexively and with humility, creating space for participants’ counterstories to unfold authentically (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, interviews were designed to flow conversationally, inviting participants to speak about themselves, their leadership journeys, and their beliefs about discipline in ways that felt natural rather than prescriptive. This approach supported deeper reflection and reduced hierarchical dynamics between researcher and participant. Additionally, I maintained an open and iterative approach to

data analysis, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives rather than imposing preconceived frameworks. Ongoing reflexive memoing supported this process by helping me surface and bracket assumptions, ensuring that participants' voices remained central throughout the analytic process.

Ultimately, my positionality as a Black female principal serves not as a limitation but as a lens through which to illuminate the systemic inequities embedded in educational leadership and student discipline. My lived experiences, within and beyond the classroom, inform a research approach rooted in justice, empathy, and cultural responsiveness. This study contributes to the broader discourse by amplifying the voices of Black principals who, despite working within systems not designed for them, continue to reimagine discipline as restorative, humanizing, and deeply transformative for Black and Brown students.

Chapter 5: Findings

Part 1-Participant Summaries

Overview

To humanize participants' lived experiences, this study presents detailed narrative summaries of the ten Black principals who participated in the research. These summaries serve not only as contextual profiles but as powerful testimonies that illustrate the nuanced realities of leading schools while navigating intersections of race, discipline, and systemic inequities. Pseudonyms and descriptions were determined from participants' names and the content shared during interviews; to protect participants' identities and professional standing, pseudonyms are used throughout the study. Each summary provides insight into the participant's background, leadership context, and disciplinary philosophy, thereby offering a lens into how their personal and professional experiences shape their practices.

Grounded in the frameworks of culturally responsive school leadership and culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports, these narratives reveal how Black principals strive to create school environments that affirm students' identities, resist exclusionary discipline practices, and foster inclusive cultures of support and accountability. The participant profiles collectively demonstrate how CRSL and CRPBIS are not merely theoretical models but living practices enacted daily by leaders committed to equity and justice. By foregrounding the voices and stories of these principals, the study resists deficit-based portrayals of Black leadership. Instead, it uplifts Black principals' roles as critical change agents who can and do use culturally responsive frameworks to challenge the status quo and transform their schools into spaces of belonging, learning, and care. To provide an overview for each participant, Table 2

summarizes each participant's key insights on CRSL/CRPBIS and their proposed next steps for Black principals and discipline practices.

Table 2. *Participant Summaries of CRSL/CRPBIS-Based Key Insights and Recommended Action Steps*

Pseudonym and Description	Key Insights-CRSL/CRPBIS	Recommended Action Steps
<i>Alove,</i> Afrocentric Leader	• Afrocentric name erasure shaped her awareness of the importance of cultural identity in schools, informing her leadership to prioritize inclusivity and cultural affirmation. • Led SEL, PBIS, and restorative efforts to address disproportionate discipline • Uses restorative approaches to support reflection over punishment • Continues culture and equity work despite systemic racism and the exit of leaders of color	• Staff PD on alternate ways to address discipline disparities • Formalize restorative tools as an alternate means of discipline • Support leaders of color through recruitment • Regularly review discipline data to guide equity-based interventions.
<i>VP,</i> Representative Leader	• Childhood experience with criminalization in schools resulted in push for equity and fairness • Acknowledges systemic discipline disparities within education • Intentionally represents and implements restorative practices • Resists deficit thinking with student expectations	• Revise discipline policies clearly and apply policies equitably • Expand restorative practices as alternatives to suspension • Provide ongoing PD to shift deficit narratives and support equity and representation • Strengthen cultural supports and systems for language access
<i>Drad,</i> Resilience Leader	• Childhood instability fueled her resilience and shaped a culturally responsive perspective • Feels reflection around being a Black educator is a source of connection and a way to model culturally affirming leadership • Maintains that culturally responsive practices are necessary but not panacea	• Continue implementing equity walks/audits district-wide • Promote visibility of black leaders • Provide systemic and reflective support around cultural appropriation like the “N-word”

<i>Cam,</i> Spiritual Leader	• Parental involvement at school impacted a strong sense of discipline within education • Attributes affirmations and innate ability to connect with students for career in education • Perceives discipline as teaching and encouraging corrections • Leans on their faith as a source for reflection when dealing with systemic disparities	• Increase parental involvement on campuses • PD around teacher/student engagement for organic restorative practices • Increase representation of black leadership at all levels within education • Form support group for leaders of color with reflection and spiritual grounding
<i>JW,</i> Advocate Leader	• Bridges lived experience with advocacy: journey from parent to educator • Disrupts bias through advocating restorative, growth-oriented PBIS approach • Advocated for equity and accountability for discipline with students of color using CRPBIS	• Ongoing bias and equity-focused PD for educators • Initiate mentorship circle for new administrators • Partner with district leaders to analyze and advocate for discipline and referral data disaggregated by race and IEP status
<i>Mas,</i> Legacy Leader	• Leadership illustrates how familial and community history can drive school transformation • Leans on family legacy within education to lead a school with family lineage • Uses integration of reflection rooms and culturally affirming practices to reframe discipline • Believes relational leadership reduces exclusionary discipline	• Expand the reflection room model into a full-tiered restorative system • Initiate community partnerships for mentoring students through restorative dialogue • Create a data storytelling project documenting school's discipline and family involvement
<i>West Coast,</i> Hip-Hop Leader	• Integration of hip-hop, affirmations, and culturally sustaining traditions for student relations • Resistance through lived experiences has shaped culturally responsive leadership • Use of multi-tiered systems of supports with culturally grounded elements to show the synergy between restorative justice and PBIS	• Systematize culturally responsive MTSS • Provide regional PD or coaching on integrating cultural identity and joy into PBIS systems. • Develop a student leadership cohort to co-design school rituals that include hip-hop culture and climate

<i>DL,</i> History Leader	• Connects lived experiences during the historical Civil Rights Movement and cultural identity to leadership • Rejects exclusionary discipline and co-creates discipline plans with families • Relationship-centered leadership has reduced suspensions	• Convert restorative model into a codified CR-PBIS framework for district use • Form professional learning communities focused on reframing discipline through a historical lens • Partner with districts to embed family co-creation behavior plans
<i>FloMo,</i> Neighborhood Leader	• Professional football career and giving back to the neighborhood help relationships and racial identity affirmation for students of color navigating bias • Emphasizes that belonging plus mentorship are critical to combat systemic inequities • Prioritizes connection before correction, using restorative dialogue to build trust	• Implement peer mentorship and adult-student advisory systems • Design staff cultural competence PD cycles • Develop family partnership protocols between school and home/neighborhood before behavior escalates
<i>Major,</i> Hometown Leader	• Proudly represents their hometown and committed to giving back to that community through education • Experienced unfair discipline during school and now advocates for equitable tiered interventions, alternatives to suspension • Emphasizes culturally relevant practices for African American students and Black girls • Believes effective CRPBIS requires consistency, staff collaboration, and community engagement	• Build a Discipline Equity Review Team • Expand parent education and engagement workshops • Lead teacher PD on culturally responsive behavior supports • Provide opportunities for hometown representation around equitable school practices to be showcased at conferences

Note. CRSL = Culturally Responsive School Leadership; CRPBIS = Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; SEL = Social and Emotional Learning; PBIS = Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; IEP = Individualized Education Program; MTSS = Multi-Tiered System of Supports.

Alove, The Afrocentric Leader

Alove serves as an elementary school principal in the same Sacramento district where she was raised, bringing experience and a deeply rooted commitment to educational equity. Her professional journey spans over two decades and includes roles in behavior intervention,

classroom teaching, district-level leadership, and now site administration. Alove's early experiences with name erasure, having her cultural identity overlooked or misrepresented, profoundly shaped her awareness of the ways schools can either affirm or marginalize students' identities. This awareness has informed her leadership philosophy, particularly her emphasis on creating inclusive school environments where students feel seen, valued, and respected.

As a site leader, Alove has championed equity-centered initiatives such as social-emotional learning, PBIS, and restorative justice practices, all aimed at dismantling the disproportionate discipline imposed on students of color. Rather than relying on punitive measures, she uses restorative approaches to foster student reflection, accountability, and growth. Even in the face of systemic racism and the departure of many leaders of color within the district, Alove has remained steadfast in her equity work, modeling courage and resilience. Her leadership reflects a deep understanding that educational justice requires not only policy changes, but also cultural shifts grounded in empathy, identity, and sustained community engagement, including staff professional development on alternative approaches to discipline disparities, and the ongoing review of discipline data to guide equity-based interventions.

VP, The Representation Leader

VP grew up in rural central California and later moved to Sacramento during high school. His early educational experiences included attending Catholic school through sixth grade, which instilled a sense of community, high standards, and strong parental involvement. VP also faced racial isolation and occasional discrimination as one of only a few Black students in a primarily Italian, Portuguese, and Armenian environment. VP recounted negative experiences in school, including a racially charged incident in elementary school and significant disciplinary encounters in junior high. High school, however, exposed him to systemic disciplinary issues and personal

encounters with unfair disciplinary practices, which later fueled his desire to work in education and ensure equity for students.

VP's postsecondary journey was marked by persistence amid setbacks. After attending several community colleges and managing work and parenthood, he eventually completed a BA and a credential at Sacramento State. His entry into educational administration was catalyzed by supportive mentors and a growing recognition of the need for culturally relevant and restorative approaches to discipline, especially for Black students, who are often subject to disproportionate punitive actions. VP now serves as a school vice principal and has been an advocate for equity, restorative justice, early intervention, and culturally responsive PBIS. At his current school, where there is notable racial diversity among administrators, VP notes that discipline is distributed more fairly due to intentional policy and restorative practices, and that ongoing professional development and culturally responsive frameworks around language access are crucial for addressing disparities in school discipline.

Drad, The Resilience Leader

Drad is a dedicated educator and administrator who grew up in Sacramento, navigating various high-poverty neighborhoods. As a young person, she navigated significant challenges, including unstable housing, living in homeless shelters, and the impact of her mother's addiction and her father's incarceration. Despite these hardships, Drad found inspiration in education, seeing it as her gateway to a better future and to distinguish herself as an outstanding student. She credits the encouragement of several Black teachers throughout her schooling with nurturing her academic talents and resilience. Drad's journey into the education profession was shaped by her determination to create a life distinct from that of her parents, ultimately leading her to

complete her undergraduate studies at Sacramento State and work full-time in the classroom through an intern credential program.

With more than two decades of experience in education, Drad has served as both a classroom teacher and an administrator in diverse schools across Sacramento. Her professional trajectory has offered her insight into the nuances of school discipline, equity, and culturally responsive practices, particularly as a Black educator working with students and families from marginalized backgrounds. Throughout her career, Drad has reflected deeply on her own biases and practices, striving to balance restorative approaches with necessary consequences, and advocating for equity within school systems that often disproportionately discipline students of color. Her leadership is characterized by a commitment to reflection and to building authentic relationships with students, families, and staff, with next steps that include implementing equity walks and promoting the visibility of Black leaders; she prioritizes ensuring that all voices are heard while fostering environments where all students, especially those most vulnerable, are supported holistically.

Cam, The Religious Leader

Cam, originally from the Bay Area, California, grew up deeply embedded in the educational landscape, with both parents working in schools he attended, his mother as a paraprofessional in elementary and middle school, and his father as a campus supervisor at the high school. Despite being an energetic “class clown” and sometimes getting into trouble for finishing assignments quickly, he found that the discipline he received was inherently restorative, often involving his parents rather than traditional punitive measures. He developed a strong affinity for school because of the support readily available from his parents, as well as meaningful relationships with teachers who channeled his energy into leadership. Such formative

experiences, especially with teachers who avoided negative labeling and instead fostered his sense of responsibility and belonging, greatly influenced his educational philosophy.

After college, when he initially considered a career in counseling, a powerful dream and encouragement from mentors and peers led him to pursue teaching. He found immediate success and connection with students, particularly by creating engaging and relationship-centered learning environments. As he advanced into administration, he maintained a strong commitment to discipline as an act of teaching and care rather than punishment, advocating for curiosity and understanding in addressing student behavior. His approach is deeply relational, emphasizing reflective practice, school-home partnerships, and culturally responsive strategies. As a district leader and minister, he remains motivated by a desire to address systemic inequities. Though he recognizes the challenges and slow pace of systemic change, he continues to advocate for love, reflection, and representation in school leadership, while also emphasizing increased parent involvement and support, as well as spirituality as a source of strength for leaders, affirming the critical impact diverse, caring educators have on both students and families.

JW, The Advocate Leader

JW, a Sacramento native with deep familial and professional roots in education, transitioned into teaching after a pivotal experience as a parent during an Individual Education Plan meeting for her child. Now, as a retired principal, she witnessed systematic marginalization of African American families and was inspired to earn her degree and credentials through Sac State's Multicultural and Multilingual program. Her early career was in a neighborhood located in Northern Sacramento, including serving as one of the district's first resource teachers focused on Language, where she noticed gaps in English development for African American students and committed to addressing them. JW consistently advocated for students of color, particularly

African American boys and those in special education, grounding her work in culturally responsive pedagogy and equitable access to learning.

As an administrator, JW grappled with discipline disparities firsthand, influenced by both her son's school experiences and her work in high-needs urban schools. She implemented PBIS strategies, restorative practices, and student-driven conflict resolution to foster a supportive school climate. Despite staff resistance, she pushed for site-based professional development that addressed bias and promoted relationship building. Her leadership style emphasized compassion, structure, and reflective practice, encouraging next steps for new administrators to have space to process challenges with a mentor and to have district leaders look more thoroughly at discipline by disaggregating data using race and IEP status. Serving a richly diverse student body in Del Paso Heights, JW's work exemplifies the power and complexity of culturally responsive and equity-centered leadership.

Mas, The Legacy Leader

Mas was raised in Sacramento's most diverse neighborhoods, where he experienced both the challenges of systemic disinvestment and the strength of community bonds. His formative years at the neighborhood elementary school, where his family lineage is deeply rooted, remain a bright chapter in his childhood, marked by a tight-knit school culture amid broader social adversity. Growing up during a period of heightened violence and trauma in the 1980s and '90s, Mas also witnessed the early stirrings of community organizing that would later shape his professional ethos. After high school, Mas returned to the same school community in various roles, from AmeriCorps service to instructional support, all while pursuing degrees at Sacramento City College and National University.

Eventually becoming principal of the school, Mas leads with a deep sense of legacy and accountability to the community that raised him. His leadership is grounded in restorative practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and an unwavering commitment to student wellness. Under his tenure, suspensions have been reduced by 50%, a reflection room has replaced punitive disciplinary measures, and culturally affirming practices, such as integrating Black history year-round, have been institutionalized. Mas' work is underscored by relational leadership, professional reflection, and a refusal to give up on students, even in the face of behavioral challenges. Through this holistic and deeply personal approach, Mas embodies a model of school leadership rooted in equity, compassion, and transformative care, with next steps that include implementing a reflection room and strengthening community partnerships.

West Coast, The Hip-Hop Culture Leader

West Coast is a veteran Bay Area educator and school leader with over two decades of experience grounded in equity, cultural responsiveness, and social justice. As a Black student educated in predominantly white Catholic schools, he developed an early awareness of identity, marginalization, and the importance of representation in education. Influenced by his father, a Bay Area public school educator and activist with a Ph.D., West Coast pursued teaching after undergraduate studies in San Francisco and earned his master's degree in education in Baltimore. His return to the Bay Area marked a turning point in his practice, as he confronted the impact of generational trauma and systemic inequities in urban schools. To better serve students, he began integrating culturally responsive and innovative strategies, including hip-hop therapy, trauma-informed practices, and youth-centered pedagogy.

Now serving as a principal in Sacramento, West Coast continues to lead with a culturally sustaining, restorative approach that prioritizes joy, belonging, and academic excellence. He has

implemented multitiered systems of support, daily affirmations rooted in agency and love, and school-wide traditions that honor the cultural identities of his students. As one of the few Black male principals in the region, he navigates ongoing resistance while preserving the school community's historical and artistic legacy. His leadership has resulted in measurable gains, including reduced suspensions and increased student achievement. West Coast embodies the role of "culture keeper," offering a model of strength-based, equity-driven leadership that centers the whole child and affirms the transformative potential of culturally congruent school leadership, with next steps focused on systemizing culturally responsive MTSS and developing a student leadership cohort to design school culture through hip hop.

DL, The History Leader

DL is an experienced educator and former administrator who grew up in North Carolina during the 1960s. His upbringing in the segregated South, where socioeconomic and generational barriers often limited educational attainment, strongly informed his perspective on the transformative power of education. DL described coming from a family where his parents had limited education, and older siblings sacrificed their education to work on the family farm. These early experiences fueled his determination to pursue higher education and later underpinned his drive to support and advocate for underprivileged students, especially those facing systemic neglect or marginalization in the school system.

Professionally, DL's approach centered on fostering agency, community, and restorative practices rather than defaulting to exclusionary discipline. As the principal of a school designated for students removed from their comprehensive sites due to behavioral issues, he prioritized relationship-building, parent engagement, and the cultivation of a positive school culture. He implemented innovative practices such as co-created discipline plans with parents, student-led

newsletters, and individualized interventions. Rejecting deficit views of students, DL reframed disciplinary moments as teachable opportunities, addressing underlying causes and centering dignity and belonging. His leadership not only transformed the reputation and outcomes at his site but also deeply impacted families, staff, and students, evidenced by persistently lowering suspension rates, academic gains, and building enduring bonds with former students. DL attributes his understanding of the history of education and this society's enduring impact to collaborative leadership, faith, and a belief in the inherent potential of every child, emphasizing education as a communal, humanizing endeavor, with next steps that include partnering with districts to embed family-co-created behavior plans.

FLoMo, The Neighborhood Leader

FLoMo, an educator with deep roots in Sacramento, reflects on his journey through sports, education, and community engagement, emphasizing the profound impact his upbringing and early mentorship had on his philosophy as an educator. Growing up in distinct low-income neighborhoods, he encountered contrasting experiences of poverty and community support, which cultivated both humility and an acute awareness of systemic inequities. His parents' involvement in the community, especially in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, laid a foundation of advocacy and service that shaped his sense of responsibility toward youth. Inspired by mentors who nurtured him through school and sports, he pursued education after a professional career in sports, motivated by the desire to support students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds and neighborhoods similar to those he grew up in.

FLoMo's educational and disciplinary philosophy centers on relational, restorative practices, particularly for students of color who are disproportionately disciplined in schools. Rejecting punitive approaches, he prioritizes building relationships, maintaining open

communication, and partnering with both students and families to foster positive behavioral outcomes and personal growth. He highlights the importance of teacher-student connection, staff cultural competence, and community representation within schools, drawing from his own experiences navigating predominantly white educational spaces as both a student and educator. FLoMo's commitment to equity relies on reflective practice and adaptability, aiming to ensure that interventions serve the holistic well-being of students, with next steps that include implementing student-adult advisory systems; he underscores the importance of not only academic success but also social-emotional development, aspiring to give back to his community and inspire systemic change within education.

Major, The Hometown Leader

Major reflects on his experiences growing up and working in the Sacramento school system, expressing pride in being shaped by the values of his hometown and giving back to the community that raised him. He highlights how both his personal upbringing and community context shaped his high regard for education. Major credits his parents' educational attainment and the prioritization of education within his Sacramento community for instilling in him an appreciation for schooling's transformative potential. However, he also recalls witnessing and personally experiencing disciplinary disparities, particularly along racial lines, in which African American students were more harshly punished than their peers for comparable behaviors. Such inequity, he suggests, underscores the necessity for educators to utilize contemporary, culturally responsive discipline strategies, such as tiered interventions that prioritize in-class behavior redirection over exclusionary practices like suspensions.

Major emphasizes the importance of adapting disciplinary approaches to the unique social realities and developmental needs of current student populations, many of whom have

grown up in a technology-saturated environment. He advocates for increased professional development for teachers, community collaboration, and parental engagement as critical to creating supportive educational environments. Major also points to systemic challenges, such as policy constraints on traditional disciplinary actions and insufficient culturally relevant support for African American students, particularly girls. To address these gaps, he proposes enhanced parent education initiatives, student engagement programs, and increased staff diversity, with next steps that include building a discipline equity review team composed of members from the local community; at the administrative level, Major values consistent school messaging, ongoing reflection, and peer collaboration to sustain and improve equitable practices, while also recognizing the importance of self-care and professional support networks for educators navigating these complex dynamics.

Part 2-Findings

Analysis of participant narratives revealed two overarching themes: *Formative School Experiences* and *Discipline and Black School Leadership*. Central to this study was the intentional capturing of participants' stories, allowing their lived experiences to illuminate how personal history and identity inform their philosophies and practices around student discipline. *Formative School Experiences* highlights participants' early encounters with schooling and the ways these experiences shaped their reflective leadership. One key subtheme of the first theme, *Bridging Personal Identity and Professional Practice*, captures how participants drew on their own educational histories, often marked by racialized discipline, resilience, and community affirmation, to inform equity-centered leadership decisions in their professional roles. Another

key subtheme under this theme is *Sense of Belonging and Community*, which reflects participants' deep-rooted connections to the communities they now lead and their belief that schools must serve as culturally sustaining spaces. Their narratives demonstrate that belonging is not incidental but must be actively cultivated through relational leadership and inclusive school cultures.

Discipline and Black School Leadership, my second theme, examines how participants navigate institutional resistance while leading with equity-driven, culturally grounded approaches to discipline. A key subtheme within this category is *Restorative Justice as a Culturally Relevant Tool*, which emerged as an essential tool for building trust, repairing harm, and strengthening school communities. This section examines the participants' lived educational experiences and the impact on their approaches to discipline within their leadership roles. Each theme is explored in depth to situate the findings within the broader context of the participants' lived experiences and the philosophies they bring to their leadership practice, aligning with the principles of CRSL.

Formative School Experiences

Participants described their early educational experiences, which shaped their understanding and approach to school discipline today. These formative encounters, often marked by exclusionary practices, racial bias, and subtle erasure of identity, were not distant childhood memories but living reference points that continue to inform their leadership decisions (Gooden, 2012; Peters & Nash, 2021; Tillman, 2004). This section highlights how the participants' educational experiences ultimately shaped their perceptions of discipline and their leadership philosophies.

Some formative moments participants shared included being misrecognized or stereotyped in ways that led to disciplinary consequences. VP recalled being mistaken for another Black student accused of misconduct: “They didn’t even ask questions. I was just the Black boy they saw and assumed it was me.” He was handcuffed while on a school campus for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, though the school realized they had wrongly accused and detained him. He stated that the psychological damage done to him through this experience ultimately shaped and framed his negative view of how schools discipline Black boys, even innocent ones. Recalling the incident, he shared, “I got arrested in class my freshman year... He thought I brought alcohol... they came in, no questions asked... Arrested me in front of everybody.” At that moment, he reflected, it left a lasting imprint, making him acutely aware of how quickly bias can enter disciplinary decision making. He further explained that “for African-American students... there’s a perception of criminality already ingrained because of the dreadlocks... their pants... they’re gathered in a big group.” These experiences underscored for him the urgency of ensuring fairness and human dignity in school discipline. As he emphasized, “Students need to be treated with fairness... I’d rather ask, and they lie to me than assume and be dead wrong, because you can never repair that person.”

VP also described being targeted with racial slurs by peers during his early schooling, which contributed negatively to how the adults at school ended up labeling him, such as being called a “monkey” by his peers. He recalled the lasting impact of such language, particularly when unaddressed by adults: “Words hurt. And when adults in power use them, they do more than hurt; they label.” He went on to share a painful childhood memory of being called out of his name and being referred to as a monkey by his peers, even recounting how his own teacher once said to his peers, “Well, the monkey doesn’t want to play,” referring to him when he was in

fourth grade. His sensitivity to language now shapes how he navigates conversations about behavior and discipline with students. Similar to VP, Cam attended schools where his parents also worked, and experienced similar situations where he felt targeted at times, even when he was simply sitting in class. He shared:

There were labels attached to me, though... There would be times when I would just be doing nothing, and the teacher would say, 'Cam, go outside.' And I'm like, what? I'm just sitting here...And then I started to see, like, there were labels attached to me, though. So that wasn't cool. (Cam)

Other participant stories reflected the impact of microaggressions that, over time, shaped their sense of belonging in school. Alove, remembered her name being repeatedly mispronounced and Anglicized by teachers. She shared: “It was a small erasure that taught me I didn’t belong.” For her, the act was not simply about mispronunciation, but about feeling unseen and unvalued within the school community. This experience, she expressed, drives her to ensure that students are being seen and heard, especially in her discipline approaches.

Cam also reflected on moving between private and public schools and the contrast in disciplinary approaches they experienced. Cam, who transitioned from a private elementary school to a public high school, was able to see firsthand how discipline was viewed from a Black boy’s perspective within a public school setting: “Discipline was different. It wasn’t about correction; it was about control. I had to unlearn a lot before I could teach others.” This shift highlighted for him the difference between school discipline systems that focus on relationship and growth versus those that prioritize compliance.

Not all participants described their educational experiences as negative. DL reflected on a schooling experience largely shaped by his family’s deep belief in the transformative power of

education. He shared, “I had clothes on my back. I had food to eat... I didn’t feel [poor]... I had older brothers that couldn’t go to school because they had to work on the farm... it kind of set the pathway for me and my younger brothers to go ahead and do the right thing, which was getting an education, graduate from high school, and take it even farther.” Growing up in the South during the Civil Rights era, DL understood education not as a privilege, but as a hard-won right—one that carried both responsibility and opportunity. DL further explained that his behavior in school was closely tied to the expectations associated with his family name, reinforcing a strong sense of accountability and personal responsibility. DL’s positive educational experiences profoundly shape his approach to discipline as a school leader. He leads with a lens that values students as individuals and positions them as active, respected participants in the discipline process rather than passive recipients of punishment. His leadership reflects a belief in student voice, dignity, and reflection, grounded in his own lived experiences of being seen, supported, and held to high expectations.

Similarly, JW described how her parents’ emphasis on education shaped both her academic identity and behavioral expectations. She noted, “My mother was very much into education because she was a teacher as well... she taught college level. So education... was often shared how important it was to her.” This early socialization into educational values influenced JW’s perspective on student discipline outcomes. When reflecting on Black student discipline, she emphasized that her role as a school leader was to clearly communicate expectations, stating, “We really took those standards [expectations] to heart... show respect, make good decisions, solve problems... making sure that all the kids understand those standards of behavior.” Together, DL and JW’s narratives illustrate how positive educational experiences,

grounded in family expectations and cultural values, informed participants' approaches to student behavior and discipline, emphasizing accountability, respect, and shared responsibility.

Across these accounts, participants emphasized that their leadership is grounded in a conscious rejection of the practices that once marginalized them, while for some, it is also informed by positive educational experiences that shaped their commitment to equity and justice. Their formative schooling experiences created a shared conviction that discipline must affirm rather than alienate, especially for Black children. The incidents they described continue to serve as reminders of the harm caused when discipline is shaped by bias, misrecognition, or a lack of cultural awareness, and as motivation to lead in ways that preserve student dignity and belonging. Furthermore, these early encounters with schooling did more than shape participants' beliefs about discipline; they also became central to how they see themselves as leaders. For many, the memories of bias, exclusion, and resilience form an inseparable link between their identities and their professional commitments and connections that directly inform the ways they engage with students, staff, and school communities.

Bridging Personal Identity and Professional Practice

Situated within the broader theme of *Formative School Experiences*, which highlighted the lived experiences that helped shape participants' discipline philosophies, *Bridging Personal Identity and Professional Practice* emerged as a subtheme rather than a separate theme because participants did not describe identity as an isolated construct. Instead, they consistently articulated how their personal histories functioned as an interpretive lens through which they understood leadership, discipline, and student outcomes. In this way, personal identity operated as a conduit connecting lived experience to disciplinary beliefs, rather than as an independent phenomenon.

Student discipline emerged organically across the interviews as participants reflected on their leadership practices and school-based decision-making. Participants consistently acknowledged the persistent disproportionality in the discipline of Black students, framing this awareness as central to how they define and evaluate student discipline outcomes, and articulated how their personal educational and life experiences shaped their approaches to addressing these inequities. Many described how their lived experiences as Black students, parents, or community members informed leadership practices centered on relationship-building, empathy, and contextual understanding rather than punitive responses. These narratives, as described below, underscore the dynamic interplay between personal history and professional identity, reinforcing leadership ideologies grounded in relational and restorative approaches to discipline (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

Two of the participants described themselves as “nontraditional” students, a positionality that shaped how they approached decision-making and student engagement. For example, FloMo reflected on athletics as a pivotal bridge to formal schooling and later leadership. In response to questions about how his experiences influenced discipline, he stated, “Sports kept me close to school. Now I use that connection to relate to my students before I even talk about behavior.” He credits athletics as a pivotal bridge to formal education, noting that a first career as a professional athlete fostered a sustained connection to his neighborhood schooling. JW, further illustrated how personal identity informed perspectives on student discipline through her experiences as a full-time parent prior to entering education and school leadership. When asked about how her lived experiences shaped her approach to discipline, JW credited motherhood as a critical lens through which she learned to interpret student behavior. She reflected on attending repeated meetings in which her own son’s behavior became central to his educational experience, noting

that these moments fundamentally shaped how she now approaches disciplinary decision-making as a principal. She is quoted saying, “I remember sitting in these IEP meetings as a parent thinking, ‘Are they typecasting all active black boys like this?’” JW described her perspective as an advantage, explaining that being a mother to a Black child who often struggled being understood within his school setting, heightened her sensitivity to how disciplinary systems can position students and families, often narrowing a child’s identity to behavior alone. This experience further informed her commitment to advocacy-oriented discipline practices that prioritize understanding, dignity, and partnership with families over exclusion or punishment. Such accounts align with research suggesting that leaders’ formative experiences often serve as cultural referents in their leadership, enabling them to establish relational trust and cultural relevance in their interactions with students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Noguera, 2008).

For others, identities shaped through family and cultural upbringing also played a significant role in shaping their leadership. When asked how their leadership philosophies developed, WestCoast, described navigating both private and public schooling while growing up in the Bay Area during the 1990s. Raised by a father who had a graduate degree and worked in a school district within the Bay Area, WestCoast explained how contrasting educational environments shaped his understanding of expectations, discipline, and support:

Growing up with a professor father who earned his PhD from Berkeley and worked in the Oakland Unified School District gave me a front-row seat to how systems function and sometimes fail. My parents placed me in an all-White Catholic school from kindergarten through 11th grade, while my community life and sports were predominantly Black. That split shaped how I view public and private education: In private school, expectations were explicit and consistently high; when I transferred to a public high school, the work

felt easier, and expectations dropped. I even found myself doing classmates' homework for a fee. That contrast taught me how profoundly expectations, culture, and support structures differ across settings, and it drives my commitment to build strong Tier 1 systems, culturally responsive practices, and high expectations for every student, regardless of the school's label. (WestCoast)

He credits his experience with both public and private school systems and growing up in a family that valued education as a foundation for his desire to work in education, particularly in environments with high discipline needs.

Four of the participants' school experiences drew them back to the same communities they grew up in. When asked about the motivation for their current leadership roles and how they defined successful outcomes for students, these four participants shared that they now work in the same districts they attended as students. This return, as FloMo, explained, was intentional: "I came back on purpose. I wanted to work in the same district where I went to school, so kids could see someone who grew up here, made it out, and chose to return for them." These participants described a deep understanding of and connection to the needs of the communities that raised them, emphasizing that this awareness strongly influenced their decision to return as Black principals. For many, the desire to "give back" was not only personal but also rooted in a sense of responsibility to the same educational and cultural spaces that shaped their own development. Drad also shared how giving back to the community helped shape her into the leader she is today. She notes, "I came back to work in the same district that raised me because I know this community, I see the kids who look like me, and I want to be the voice that helps ensure they're seen, supported, and treated fairly." Mas attributes his success to the path he took from his formative school years and beyond. For example, Mas shared, "I started at the school as

an AmeriCorps member when I turned 21, then became a clerk, an instructional aide, a teacher, and now the principal, coming back to lead the school I attended.”

As a subtheme, *Bridging Personal Identity and Professional Practice* underscores how Black principals often blur the boundaries between personal and professional roles, leading with a sense of purpose shaped by lived histories. Participants’ stories reveal that their perspectives on student discipline outcomes were inseparable from their racial identity, cultural background, and educational trajectories. Rather than emphasizing punishment or control, many participants described discipline outcomes in terms of restoration, belonging, and sustained student engagement, approaches rooted in their own experiences navigating educational systems as Black students, parents, and leaders.

Sense of Belonging and Community

Participants emphasized that cultivating strong community ties was a foundational element of their discipline philosophy. Such connections were described as essential for fostering trust, accountability, and a collective sense of belonging within school settings (Anderson et al., 2022). This subtheme emerged within the broader theme of Formative School Experiences because participants frequently connected their current leadership approaches to early experiences that shaped their understanding of community, cultural identity, and relational responsibility within educational spaces. These formative influences informed how participants now prioritize relationship-building as a core component of their disciplinary leadership.

Alove, for example, highlighted the significance of her dual role as both educator and community member, noting that her visibility beyond the school reinforced her credibility and strengthened relational trust: “They see me at the grocery store, the gas station. I can’t be a stranger in my own school community.” This perspective illustrates how leadership that is

embedded in the community extends beyond institutional boundaries, creating a culturally responsive approach to discipline that affirms students' and families' sense of belonging (Lopez & Jean Marie, 2021; Turner & Goings, 2019).

In describing their leadership philosophies, JW highlighted how her own sense of belonging as a former student shaped the ways she built and sustained community in her leadership role. She reinforced her desire to serve as a role model for students who shared her background and to expand opportunities for students to experience fairness and dignity in disciplinary practices. JW explained that her leadership was not only about guiding students in the present but also about cultivating future leadership: "I want to be a mentor for the next generation of Black leaders." This reflection illustrates how participants linked personal histories of belonging to their professional responsibility of fostering belonging for others, particularly students of color navigating educational systems (Anderson et al., 2022; Lopez & Jean Marie, 2021).

Another participant expressed a strong desire to uplift cultural identity in their schools. WestCoast recalls using hip-hop culture to connect with students:

I started working for this other group called Beats Rhymes in Life, which is a hip-hop therapy group. And I started looking at, like, trauma responses, you know, having communication around your feelings. And that really opened up my eyes to, like, students who were, you know, kind of came from more humble beginnings and didn't necessarily have the same background that I had...(WestCoast)

WestCoast shares how this cultural connection helped them connect with students while fostering a sense of belonging among them. He highlights the criminalization of discipline through a punitive lens. He states:

And that's what a lot of the older generation is used to in general...punishment, punishment, punishment, punishment. ...If you over punish people and then you criminalize them, now they feel like they're not a part of the group. And so, you know, again, I bring in that love... This is not who we are. This is not who you are. You're better than this. (WestCoast)

This approach reflects a leadership style grounded in authenticity, as he draws upon his own identity and lived experiences to connect with students. He acknowledged that although the trajectory of education and discipline practices continues to evolve, punitive models remain deeply entrenched. For WestCoast, it is the responsibility of the next generation of leaders to initiate a paradigm shift from punitive to restorative approaches in order to, as he described it, “save” students by fostering environments that emphasize growth, accountability, and belonging.

Participants' reflections demonstrate that their formative school experiences significantly shaped their conceptualization of belonging and community in their leadership practice. These early experiences informed their understanding that discipline is most effective when grounded in relationships, trust, and cultural awareness. By fostering environments where students feel seen, valued, and connected, these leaders positioned belonging not only as a social outcome but as a foundational strategy for creating supportive and accountable school communities.

Discipline and Black School Leadership

While participants were united in their commitment to equity-driven discipline practices, many described the added burden of navigating predominantly White disciplinary systems as the sole or one of very few Black leaders on their campuses. This section explores how participants often felt positioned as spokespersons for Black communities, expected to represent and defend Black perspectives in disciplinary decision-making spaces. Participants also described navigating

racially charged moments, including the policing of language, such as decisions surrounding the use of the n-word, as well as instances in which their mere presence and authority as principals were openly questioned. In response to these compounded pressures, several participants shared that they leaned on their faith as a source of resilience and grounding, enabling them to persist in equity-focused leadership despite isolation and scrutiny. Collectively, these experiences shaped participants' philosophies of discipline, which were informed not only by professional training but by the lived realities of being Black leaders operating within systems not designed for them (Anderson et al., 2022).

Cam, the “Spiritual Leader,” acknowledged the burden of being a Black leader, sharing, “It’s a lonely chair... But we’re here to do it... And you [have to be] built for it,” highlighting both the isolation and resilience required in this role. Drad captured this tension, reflecting, “I was the only Black voice at the table. I hated being looked at and expected to speak for a whole community, and sometimes, it felt like they weren’t really listening.” Her account underscores the racialized expectations placed on Black school leaders, who are often positioned simultaneously as representatives of their entire community and as advocates for more just disciplinary practices (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021; Turner & Goings, 2019). When conversations about discipline outcomes arose, Drad reflected on a discussion with her principal at the time, when she was serving as an assistant principal, regarding the disproportionate suspension of Black students. She recalled her principal noting concerns about the suspension data, and her sharing, “It’s at us [Admin] again, saying we’re really suspending [Black students]. But we also had a lot of Black kids. Still, it felt like the suspensions were disproportionate.” Such experiences highlight how philosophies of discipline are not abstract frameworks but are deeply

tied to the sociopolitical contexts in which leaders work, requiring them to balance their racial identity, advocacy, authenticity, and institutional constraints (Khalifa, 2018).

As the only Black administrator on campus, one participant described the isolation of being positioned as the primary voice responsible for defending the prohibition of racist language, including the use of the N-word term, given its harmful historical and social connotations. Drad, the "Resilience Leader," recounted one such instance, reflecting on the need to explain her perspective to a colleague who did not initially understand the rationale for banning the N-word. She states:

So I had an issue with the N-word, right? So the issue with the N-word was kind of like, okay, no one gets to say [it], that's fine. If it's used as a racial slur, it's different than if you're using it casually with your friends. Like, we all know there's a difference, but we're not going to use it that way. And so if they use it targeted like a racial slur, we're going to deal with it differently than if they're casually using it with peers. The White dude in my meeting was like, "Well, I feel like they should all be judged the same, regardless of whether you're using it in a targeted way." I said, "It's not the same." (Drad)

This exchange illustrates how discipline conversations often require Black leaders to engage in racial translation work, explaining culturally and historically situated understandings of language to colleagues operating from a color-blind or ostensibly neutral framework. Drad's insistence that context matters underscores how equity-driven discipline resists one-size-fits-all approaches and instead demands nuance, cultural knowledge, and moral clarity. In navigating this moment, she balanced institutional expectations with her responsibility to affirm students' lived realities, highlighting the added labor Black leaders perform when advocating for racially conscious disciplinary practices within predominantly White systems.

One participant also recalled that their mere presence led parents and staff to question their role in discipline. WestCoast, the “Hip Hop Leader,” discussed the discomfort his presence created while being a new principal at his school: “There was a lot of pearl clutching. A Black man in charge of a school? That challenged some people.” He shares the first time he started as a principal at a new school.

Oh, the pearl clutching is ridiculous around here... Particularly though, it was like, again, a lot of pearl clutching. So what I noticed is that when I first got here, there were African American students who were actually just kind of running amok, doing whatever they felt like doing. And so I came in, developed a tier one, excuse me, multitiered system of support, even before the district even said anything, as that is the mantra that we're going to start using. (WestCoast)

The incident of “pearl clutching” he refers to in the quote above occurred on the first day he started as principal at his new school. Several White women and parents, not realizing he was the actual principal, approached the front office and questioned why this Black man was out greeting students. He reflected that the encounter, while jarring, reminded him why his presence as a Black leader is so necessary, despite the overt questioning of his authority and role. Despite this incident, WestCoast framed his leadership as a responsibility: “I want to be the principal I needed. One who sees you, believes in you, and fights for you.” Mas, the “Legacy Leader,” recounted professional retaliation from parents for pushing equity: “They tried to come for my job. But I kept receipts, and I kept going.” He shares that being an agent of change is not always well-received, even by the communities he was doing it for.

The *Black Principals and Discipline* theme highlights the resilience required of Black principals working to dismantle racial discipline disparities in systems not built for them or their

students. For Cam, the “Religious Leader,” navigating these pressures as often the “only Black” at the table requires leaning on his faith, which provides him with strength and guidance. Drawing on this foundation, he approaches discipline thoughtfully and intentionally, sharing his philosophy through the lens of this reflection: He states:

And so, you know, I'm also a pastor, right? And so in the book of Proverbs, it says it. God disciplines those he loves. And so that's what helped me as an administrator, because I know I gotta give you (student) this discipline. I gotta give you (student) these consequences. But I'm doing it because I love you, right? Because if you don't correct these behaviors now, you're going to go out in this real world, get your head “knocked” off.

Using religion to reflect on their leadership was another theme among two of the participants. Both Cam and DL described leaning on their faith to sustain them as they navigate a school system and discipline policies that were not designed with Black students or Black leaders in mind. Cam mentioned drawing on biblical teachings centered on love, instruction, and reflection. Rather than viewing discipline as punishment, he framed it as a moral and relational responsibility, one rooted in care, teaching, and accountability. Cam, in particular, articulated a discipline philosophy grounded in reflection and love, which he traced directly to his faith. He explained that biblical principles guided his approach to working with students, stating:

That piece is what keeps me doing the work, right?... I had this phrase “love, teach, reflect, repeat”, right? That was our process; we were going to love the kids regardless. Keep loving the kids...But when you look at the numbers, the numbers still show, you know, that our brown students are getting suspended at higher numbers. Even with that...So when I reflect, it can become disheartening. It can become deflating, you know,

because you know that there are people who are in there who are loving kids, providing the resources...And yet the numbers still persist. So you're like, what is it? And if you really do a root cause analysis, it's just the system. The system is not designed for our students of color to succeed.

DL, the “History Leader,” described the intensified demands of navigating school discipline systems, particularly when disciplinary decisions involved Black students and were subject to heightened scrutiny from parents, staff, and district personnel. He emphasized the importance of staying grounded in his purpose while working within an educational system that often positioned him at the center of tension surrounding student behavior and accountability. Reflecting on these pressures, DL shared, “I always kept my Bible in my desk,” explaining that he turned to it for reflection during especially challenging days when behaviors were heightened, and pushback emerged from multiple directions. For DL, discipline was not simply about managing student behavior but about mediating between institutional expectations and his commitment to equitable treatment of Black students. The emotional labor of justifying disciplinary decisions, particularly those that resisted punitive responses, required intentional grounding and resiliency. Like Cam, DL, relied on faith and reflection as a sustaining practice that enabled him to persist amid constant demands to explain, defend, and recalibrate discipline decisions within systems that often defaulted to deficit-oriented narratives about Black students. These reflective and faith-based practices functioned as critical coping mechanisms, allowing Black principals to endure the cumulative pressures of navigating racialized discipline systems while remaining anchored in their leadership purpose.

Restorative Justice as a Culturally Relevant Tool

Emerging within the broader theme of *Discipline and Black School Leadership*, this subtheme captures how Black principals conceptualized restorative practices not as isolated disciplinary strategies, but as mechanisms for sustaining students' connection to school and community. Rather than functioning as a standalone theme, *Restorative Practices as a Culturally Relevant Tool* is positioned as a subtheme because participants consistently framed discipline outcomes in relation to belonging, relational trust, and community accountability. In their narratives, restorative practices served as one of several interrelated approaches used to cultivate inclusive school environments, reinforcing belonging as the overarching outcome.

Some participants consistently endorsed restorative approaches as a necessary departure from exclusionary forms of discipline. They emphasized that punitive responses, particularly suspension and removal, not only disproportionately harm students but also erode students' sense of belonging within school communities (Grayman, 2019). While restorative practices were widely supported, principals cautioned against their uncritical or procedural implementation. Participants noted that when restorative justice is applied as a standardized intervention without attention to context, culture, and relationships, it risks becoming another compliance-driven mandate rather than a transformative practice (Hopkins, 2015). Two participants consistently endorsed restorative practices as a necessary departure from exclusionary forms of discipline; as JW shared, "I started really focusing my conversations around restorative justice... We had incentives for kids to behave properly, a student store... attached to a center for behavior," highlighting the use of restorative and positive reinforcement in contrast to punitive discipline, while DL emphasized, "Keep suspensions a last resort. Understand the story beneath the behavior, set clear rules, teach the skills, essays, reflection, repair, and watch the culture

change.” However, their perspectives also reflected important layers of complexity, with strong agreement that punitive responses disproportionately harm students and undermine school belonging (Grayman, 2019). At the same time, one cautioned against the uncritical adoption of restorative justice as a standardized intervention, noting that its success depends on authentic implementation and sensitivity to the unique cultural, relational, and developmental needs of school communities (Hopkins, 2015). They emphasized that when restorative practices are applied without regard to local context or the lived experiences of students, they risk becoming another procedural mandate rather than a transformative practice (Hopkins, 2015). Drad, the “Resilience Leader,” states how “Restorative [discipline] isn’t a monolith. It should reflect the culture and identity of the students it serves.” This perspective underscores the importance of culturally responsive implementation, emphasizing that restorative practices must be adaptable, context-specific, and grounded in the lived experiences of students to be effective.

Two participants shared their restorative practices and how making connections with students impacts their leadership roles as Black principals. As Major, the “Hometown Leader” noted, “Having programs that cater to their needs, I think, would be extremely helpful.” For Major, discipline outcomes were closely tied to whether students felt supported rather than displaced, reinforcing the idea that belonging functions as a protective factor against disengagement. Mas, the “Legacy Leader,” who currently serves as principal at the same school he once attended as a student, described implementing a “reclusive room” as a restorative alternative to suspension. He emphasized, “We don’t just send kids away. We pause, we talk, we teach.” In this space, students remain at school and continue their academic work while engaging in guided dialogue with adults to reflect on their behavior, understand its impact, and develop strategies for making amends. By combining reflection, accountability, and continued learning,

the reclusive room allows students to experience consequences without being excluded from the school community, supporting both behavior improvement and a sustained sense of belonging. This example illustrates how these Black principals' perspectives on student discipline outcomes are informed by a commitment to restorative approaches that disrupt exclusionary practices while maintaining student connection and equity within the school.

Similarly, Cam, the “Religious Leader,” connected his own schooling experiences to his understanding of discipline and belonging. Reflecting on moments when teachers invested in him personally, he stated,

“I ran into my fourth-grade teacher a couple of years ago, who was, you know, super proud. I hear you're a principal. That's great. I always believed in you. And she was my favorite teacher because one, she would, you know, make me a leader in class, right? I was like her assistant. She called me her little assistant. And instead of, you know, sitting in timeout or putting you in a fourth, you know, put you in a corner of the class. When I finished the assignment, she would make me get up, correct other people's papers, run stuff to the office for her, you know, do little errands. And that right there gave me a sense of pride, a connection, a relationship with the teacher. And it made me like, just more on point and on task.” (Cam)

Cam's reflection highlights how relational trust and community connection shaped his engagement as a student, reinforcing his shared belief that discipline outcomes improve when students feel seen, valued, and supported, as reflected in his statements, “Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care,” “Be relational,” and “Get curious... peel back those layers and see what's going on so that you can appropriately address what's going

on,” alongside his observation that “we closed the achievement gap at my site... We dropped our suspension numbers.”

Another restorative practice described by participants involved the intentional inclusion of families in the goal-setting process for students with behavior plans. DL, the “History Leader,” who was a principal at a specialized behavioral school that served students removed from traditional settings, explained his strategy of facilitating restorative meetings that engaged both students and their parents. Within these meetings, collaborative goal setting became central, particularly given that his school represented the final opportunity for students before permanent exclusion from the district. As DL reflected, the process extended beyond addressing surface-level behaviors to interrogating underlying causes and charting actionable pathways forward: “It’s not just about the behavior, it’s about the why, and then the what now.” He emphasized that parental involvement is one of the most crucial factors in student behavior, and approaching behavioral goals collectively is a “win-win” for all.

Parent collaboration was a recurring strategy. JW, the “Advocate Leader,” who went into education after sitting in numerous meetings about her own son’s behavior, noted her shift from viewing school as an outsider to leading as an insider: “I started thinking like a parent. That helped me discipline like a human.” JW further explained that, as an administrator, she would collaborate with parents by advocating for them in IEP meetings. “I was the one sitting in the IEP meetings... my heart came from that, and I really wanted parents to understand that I was an advocate for you and your child, because I’ve been sitting in that chair.” These experiences enabled JW to connect with parents through empathy and shared understanding, positioning herself as both an educational leader and a partner to families. Her approach to discipline and collaboration was grounded in trust, advocacy, and respect, strengthening relationships and

reinforcing parents' sense of belonging within the school community. Major, the "Hometown Leader," whose own school discipline experiences prompted him to pursue a career in education, discussed transparency with parents as a tool for building trust. Major shared, "We don't just call [parents] when something goes wrong. We call to celebrate, to check in. That way, when we do have to talk about behavior, it's not a surprise." These strategies, participants shared, were not part of the formal training they received in their administration programs; however, they acknowledged that employing these strategies has helped parents understand the discipline process within schools in a more humane light.

One participant acknowledged that parents are not always available and can sometimes be missing in students' lives, particularly for students who need support the most. This participant emphasized the need to value student voice in restorative approaches, both within and outside the classroom. Drad, the "Resilience Leader," whose parents were not active in her educational career, credits having Black teachers who played a key role in her education by giving her a voice within the classroom. She mentions how the Black students she currently serves tell her that much of their behavior stems from not wanting to be in class because they often get in trouble when voicing their opinion on subject matter. She shares her perspective on student voices regarding the reading material in class and how it makes them feel.

The Black kids we interviewed said they're reading challenging novels. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, stuff like that...Because the Black kids were saying that kids would be teasing them about it. And how their White peers were saying how "they can't say the N-word", but you can say it, right, John? You can say that word in real life." Now, in this case, that classroom [culture] hadn't been built, so the community in the classroom was not prepared for that kind of book. Yeah. So you're putting your Black kids in a place

where they don't want to be and where kids are teasing them. With a really high-level book like that, you have to build and foster community. Right. (Drad)

As Drad put it, “Restorative [discipline] isn’t a monolith. It should reflect the culture and identity of the students it serves.” She further illustrated this belief by describing restorative responses as opportunities for education rather than punishment, stating, “Let’s talk about it. Let me educate you. Let me call your parent and give you some homework to do.” This approach highlights how restorative discipline, when enacted through dialogue, family engagement, and reflective learning, becomes a culturally responsive practice that centers understanding, accountability, and growth rather than exclusion. She feels restorative practices have to be a natural way of dealing with the various cultures that make up our educational system, and that this often stems from students not being heard or seen within this classroom, and from the role educators play in this absence.

With the push for restorative approaches, participants acknowledged that teachers play a significant role in implementation, as they are considered the first line of discipline before the situation is escalated to the principal. WestCoast, the “Hip Hop Leader,” reflected on staff resistance when first starting at his current school, stating, “We had teachers leave because they didn’t like the culture shift. They weren’t ready for a restorative lens.” Still, he remained committed: “It’s not about what they’re ready for. It’s about what our kids need.” He states:

But with those two teachers that I was telling you about who ended up leaving years consecutively... that’s what they’re trying to forge. A lot of the problem around, ‘Oh, he’s allowing, you know, parents to disrespect us. He’s allowing kids to get away with things.’ And I’m like, ‘No, I’m not allowing any of those things,’ but I have to be able to make an administrative decision based on what I see is best for the long run. (WestCoast)

Another participant expressed the need to address teachers and parents who still didn't understand the importance of a more restorative approach to discipline. Alove, the "Afrocentric Leader," described how her restorative approach, including the use of a calming corner in the front office, has at times been met with resistance from staff who favor punitive disciplinary responses. She noted that such resistance often stems from traditional beliefs about control and compliance rather than consideration of student outcomes. Drawing on her background in behavioral management, she emphasized that restorative practices are intentionally designed to reduce exclusionary discipline and support students' ability to remain engaged in their learning. When challenged by staff or questioned by supervisors about her restorative practices philosophy, she responded, "...because in my interview I told you who I was, right? My work has been to interrupt disproportionate suspension data," underscoring that her leadership approach is both deliberate and foundational. Similar to Alove, the "Afrocentric Leader," FloMo's take on restorative approaches is stated below:

It all depends. But everything for me is restorative, especially for elementary. I've seen high school, and it tends to be more punitive. But you can front-load a lot of things to stop it from being punitive, like just creating relationships with kids. Prior to that, if you even know a kid is "off task" or has "bad behavior," then we could... reach out to those kids before school even starts... But even when it [behaviors] start, just making sure you gotta check in with them, right? Like, for me, I'm just personable because you have to be accessible. (FloMo)

This subtheme highlights how Black principals rely on their cultural and innate ability to connect with students on a level that goes beyond the surface. A few participants state that no cultural restorative training was given to them outside of the Positive Behavioral Interventions

and Supports (PBIS) while in their administrative programs, yet they have expressed using some form of cultural and restorative approaches throughout their leadership roles regarding discipline once they became principals. Cam shared that he was familiar with culturally responsive pedagogy; he emphasized that this knowledge did not translate into discipline-specific training. As Cam explained, “I’ve heard of culturally responsive teaching... So I know about the pedagogy part, but culturally based PBIS would be something for me that would be more organic.” Cam’s reflection highlighted a recurring gap between instructional frameworks and disciplinary practice, where culture-informed approaches to behavior were not formally addressed. JW reflected that as she was exiting the profession, her district’s focus remained largely on PBIS, noting, “As I was exiting, what we really started looking at was PBIS, and I started really focusing my conversations around restorative justice.” Her statement underscored how restorative approaches emerged more as a parallel or corrective response to PBIS rather than as an integrated, culturally grounded framework.

There was a common thread within the participants' reasoning behind why restorative practices must be acknowledged and woven into the fabric of their school culture and student discipline outcomes. Their perspectives highlight that restorative discipline, when implemented authentically and responsively, serves to strengthen school belonging rather than merely manage behavior. As a subtheme, this finding reinforces the broader theme of “Discipline and Black School Leadership,” illustrating how discipline outcomes are most effective when they sustain connection, affirm student dignity, and reflect the lived realities of the communities’ they serve. Some participants cited reasons like having a sense of belonging among students and even as leaders, staff buy-in, and fighting against a system heavily ingrained in punitive measures, for why it is their responsibility to continue these practices.

Summary

The lived experiences of Black principals deeply inform their approaches to discipline. Their personal histories of marginalization, cultural pride, community ties, and resilience serve as the foundation for leadership practices grounded in equity and restorative justice. These principals lead not only with policy but with heart, memory, and a sense of responsibility to disrupt the status quo. VP, the “Representation Leader,” shares that he understands that his presence is not only needed but required within this broken system. He shares:

I understand I have a certain amount of authority and power, and I have to be judicious.

Not everyone has it. I stand in the gap for those students because their families are entrusting their students... There’s an obligation from me. (VP)

Effective educational leadership involves not only authority but the ethical and judicious use of power, aligning with “servant leadership” philosophies where leaders prioritize the needs of students and communities (Greenleaf, 1977; Shields, 2010). The participants’ voices provide critical insights into how schools can better serve Black students by reimagining discipline practices as restorative and instructional rather than a mechanism of control. DL, the “History Leader,” summarized the collective sentiment from the participants’ discipline philosophies and perspective on discipline outcomes perfectly by stating: “Our students don’t need to be fixed. The system does. And that starts with how we [Black Principals] discipline.”

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

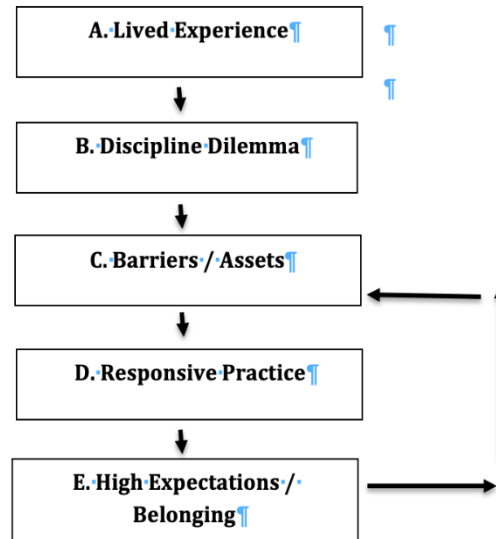
This study sought to explore how the lived experiences of Black elementary school principals within the Sacramento area impacted their discipline philosophies. Their shared stories revealed not only how they navigated educational spaces as Black students, educators, and now school leaders, but also how those experiences shaped their commitment to disrupting racial disparities in student discipline outcomes. Through existing literature and in-depth interviews, several themes emerged that illuminate how personal and professional lived experiences inform their leadership philosophies, particularly in relation to school discipline. Anchored in the frameworks of CRSL and CRPBIS, the findings demonstrate a shift away from exclusionary and punitive discipline models toward restorative, student-centered practices rooted in cultural understanding, equity, and high expectations.

Theme Map: A Progression of Practice

The data revealed a conceptual progression among the participants' experiences and leadership development, illustrated by the following theme map (Figure 4). This progression begins with the participants' early lived experiences as Black students and educators (A), which often included racialized disciplinary encounters, shaping a deep awareness of the discipline dilemma that disproportionately affects Black students (B). In confronting these realities, principals encountered both barriers and assets within their school communities, including systemic inequities, cultural disconnects, and the power of community and family (C). Through reflection and intention, they implemented responsive practices (D) rooted in CRPBIS and CRSL, such as restorative circles, relational discipline, and culturally affirming communication, leading to the cultivation of high expectations and a sense of belonging for all students (E). This

approach affirms student identity while holding them to rigorous behavioral and academic standards.

Figure 4. Theme Map



The two themes that emerged from the data provide insight into the critical consciousness and intentionality Black principals bring to discipline in urban schools. Each theme addresses a facet of how lived experience translates into leadership practice. The themes were as follows: “Formative School Experiences” and “Discipline and Black School Leadership.” This section will delve deeper into the findings and their connections to the literature. Additionally, the chapter will discuss the study's limitations, implications for policy, and future research still needed on this topic.

Discussion of Findings

Through counterstories about formative school experiences, participants’ narratives challenge the dominant mainstream story of school discipline that frames punitive, exclusionary practices as neutral, necessary, and effective in maintaining order. In educational leadership

literature, discipline is often depicted as a technical, compliance-driven function of the principalship, emphasizing control, uniformity, and objectivity while minimizing the role of race, power, and historical inequities (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Many of the principals described disciplining with an innate restorative lens, one that arises not from policy mandates, but from their personal histories of being misrecognized, mislabeled, or disproportionately punished as Black youth within educational spaces. For example, one participant, Major, the “Hometown Leader,” recalled being suspended for something as minor as throwing a piece of paper. At the same time, another participant, VP, the “Representative Leader,” recounted being arrested simply for “being in the wrong place at the wrong time and being Black.” These experiences parallel the broader literature on the criminalization of Black students and the school-to-prison pipeline, which documents how disciplinary practices rooted in racial bias and deficit perceptions position Black students as “troublemakers” regardless of actual behavior (Annamma et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2017; Cuvson, 2016).

The participants’ stories also illustrate how their early encounters with exclusionary discipline continue to inform their present leadership philosophies. Rather than perpetuating punitive approaches, they consciously resist them, adopting more restorative, humanizing responses as administrators. Their counterstories disrupt dominant deficit narratives and align with scholarship that critiques how Black students are disproportionately subjected to labeling, surveillance, and exclusion (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Importantly, these findings directly connect to my research question. Participants’ reflections reveal that their personal encounters with racialized discipline not only heighten their awareness of inequities but also serve as the foundation for their intentional adoption of restorative approaches. Their perspectives suggest that lived experience functions as a critical driver in

shaping discipline practices that seek not only to address inequities but also to create more just and supportive outcomes for Black students.

For some participants, growing up in tightly knit, culturally grounded communities created a leadership stance rooted in high expectations and collective responsibility. Many of the participants' stories resonate with Epstein's (2011) framework on family-school partnerships, which emphasizes shared responsibility across home and school through practices like communication, volunteering, learning at home, and decision-making. However, their experiences also complicate this framework by illustrating how cultural expectations can embed accountability in more implicit and collective ways that are often overlooked in mainstream schooling. For example, FLoMo, the "Neighborhood Leader," notes, "There's a collective mentality around here to do for the community... when you're around good folks, there's a group of us that all like to get there. I'm pulling everybody's resources. All of us were in this together for the children," reflecting a shared responsibility for student success grounded in community collaboration. This perspective aligns with Epstein's framework, emphasizing the importance of family and community partnerships as integral to supporting student learning and development beyond formal school structures. Similarly, Major, the "Hometown Leader," explains, "There needs to be more individuals that students can relate to on campus... having programs that cater to their needs... surrounding our girls with positive people that look like them," pointing to a culturally grounded sense of accountability that is not always captured in traditional partnership models with just families and schools. DL, the "History Leader," adds, "by the time we walk out of my office, I have both parents smiling at each other, giving each other a hug, making their kids give each other a hug... All I did was stand in the gap... make two parents understand that neither is less than the other... the main thing was understanding, appreciation, and moving

forward together,” further demonstrating how these lived experiences reflect a more holistic and relational approach to family–school engagement, one that both aligns with and expands upon Epstein’s framework. Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) also argue that equitable family engagement requires shared power between schools and communities. Taken together, participants’ perspectives reinforce this idea, emphasizing that authentic family partnerships are not simply about involvement, but about honoring families as co-educators and decision-makers whose voices and cultural knowledge shape student success.

Family Presence: Support and Systemic Tensions

Based on the findings, the data indicate that participants demonstrated how family presence in schools can provide both support and visibility, while also highlighting inequities. Cam, the “Spiritual Leader,” described how having parents employed on school campuses strengthened his connection to school, but he was still being labeled due to his race. He recalls, “There were also perks to having my parents on campus... But I also saw how school could be... a negative thing. I wasn’t always off task... I finished my assignments too fast... And then I started to see, like, there were labels attached to me, though, right? So there would be times where I would just be doing nothing, and the teacher would be like, “Go outside... I’m getting like... unjustly and unfairly labeled for things.” His story reflects Delgado Bernal’s (2002) concept of “educational subtractiveness,” where even strong parental involvement cannot insulate students of color from deficit-based assumptions. Cam’s counterstory also illustrates Matsuda’s (1987) point that systemic racism and inequities operate even when families are visibly engaged.

Resilience Without Traditional Family Structures

Other narratives highlighted how resilience emerges even in the absence of stable family support, offering important insight into my research question on the lived experiences of Black principals and their perspectives on student outcomes. Drad, the “Resilience leader,” recounted navigating homelessness and parental incarceration, yet described education as both a survival mechanism and a pathway to transformation. She shares:

My mom was an addict. Okay? My dad was incarcerated, and I knew the only way to not be like her was to create a life for myself, and I knew the only way to do that was through education. I had great teachers along the way. You know, some Black teachers in elementary and middle school who really encouraged me really poured into me. They saw the potential in me. (Drad)

Her story reflects the development of aspirational capital under challenging conditions (Yosso, 2005) and underscores how affirming educators, particularly Black teachers, created the conditions for her success. Experiences like hers help explain how Black principals, drawing from similar lived realities, often center relationships, high expectations, and culturally affirming practices as key drivers of student outcomes. These findings align with Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which calls for educators to recognize and build upon students’ cultural wealth. By resisting deficit-based narratives of vulnerable households, her counterstory also reflects Richard Delgado’s (1989) view of storytelling as a form of resistance, illustrating how students, and, in turn, the principals they become, transform oppressive conditions into sources of strength that inform their approach to improving student outcomes.

Lived Experience as Leadership Philosophy

Across this study, participants shared leadership approaches to discipline that were grounded not in formal training but in lived racialized experiences. For example, WestCoast shared:

I was young, I was kind of hotheaded. So I really didn't understand the fact that you had to look at the whole child... When I came to Oakland, I started working with a hip hop therapy group, looking at trauma responses and communication around feelings. That opened my eyes. I shifted from 'just get your work done' to building tiered supports and restorative practices, strength-based, culturally congruent, youth-centered, and our suspensions and chronic absenteeism steadily fell.

Participants consistently rejected punitive, compliance-oriented models and instead framed discipline as relational, reflective, and restorative. Such perspectives align with Noddings' (2005) ethic of care, through participants' emphasis on relational, whole-child support; with Carolyn Shields' (2010) transformative leadership in their commitment to challenging inequitable systems based on their lived experiences; and with Muhammad Khalifa's (2018) culturally responsive leadership as they draw on their cultural knowledge to affirm student identity and improve outcomes. Importantly, participants' counterstories directly challenge dominant disciplinary practices that disproportionately harm Black students (Skiba et al., 2002). By reframing discipline as an opportunity to teach, affirm, and partner with families, participants demonstrated how counterstories function as tools to contest inequitable systems while modeling alternative practices rooted in care and justice.

Counterstories as Leadership Praxis

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate how counterstories become a form of leadership praxis. Participants transformed personal experiences of struggle, resilience, and marginalization into forms of leadership capital (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Their stories resist deficit-oriented framings while affirming Matsuda's (1987) and Delgado's (1989) argument that counterstories empower marginalized voices and disrupt dominant discourses. By situating their leadership in lived experience, participants extended existing equity-centered leadership frameworks, reframing discipline as restorative rather than punitive and highlighting the epistemic authority of Black principals' voices. In doing so, they positioned themselves not just as leaders within schools, but as cultural workers who reimagine leadership as a practice of justice, care, and community partnership.

Cultural Disconnect in Discipline

The findings display how participants' approaches closely reflect the principles of Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS), which challenge the colorblind assumptions embedded in traditional PBIS by centering equity and cultural relevance (Bal, 2018; McIntosh et al., 2014). The leaders in this study were intentional about grounding discipline in practices that acknowledged students' cultural identities and lived realities. Rather than viewing misbehavior as evidence of moral failure, they treated it as an opportunity for learning, healing, and relationship-building. Their stories demonstrate how Black principals use their positionality to bridge the gap between rigid institutional frameworks and the complex cultural realities of students. This move reflects my second research question, which centers on Black principals' perspectives on student discipline outcomes and how these perspectives inform their enactment of culturally responsive leadership in their schools. By

foregrounding care, curiosity, and empathy, participants enacted the core elements of CRSL, which calls for leaders to cultivate inclusive environments, build strong relationships, and actively resist marginalization (Khalifa et al., 2016, 2020).

Equally important, participants connected their current practices to their own personal experiences with inequitable discipline. Several recalled how, as students, they faced harsher punishments than their peers for similar behaviors or were subjected to police presence in schools more frequently than they were offered access to counselors or mentors. These memories underscore the lasting impact of racialized disciplinary practices and how they shape leadership philosophies. Their willingness to draw from those experiences exemplifies the role of counterstories in educational leadership, using personal histories not only to critique systemic inequities but also to guide the creation of more just alternatives (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For these leaders, adopting restorative practices and CRPBIS frameworks was not a matter of following trends but a deliberate act of resistance against the very systems that once harmed them.

I developed an initial theoretical framework for this study (Figure 1); however, the findings extended my understanding of how Black principals enact discipline in practice. Their stories demonstrate that discipline, when reimaged through CRPBIS and CRSL, can move beyond punishment to affirm student identity, agency, and belonging. This connects directly to my broader research question about how Black principals utilize their lived experiences to transform disciplinary practices in ways that challenge systemic inequities. By replacing exclusionary practices with equity-centered frameworks, these leaders work to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and reframe schools as spaces of healing, reflection, and cultural affirmation. In doing so, they address the sub-question by demonstrating that their perspectives

on student discipline outcomes reflect a clear need for a fundamental shift in disciplinary approaches.

Reflections from Participants

Participants consistently emphasized that serving as a Black principal carries an implicit responsibility to advocate for equity, particularly within disciplinary systems where students of color have been historically marginalized. In addressing the sub-question regarding Black principals' perspectives on student discipline outcomes, participants demonstrated a clear awareness of persistent racial disparities, with several explicitly noting that suspension rates for Black students remain disproportionately high despite ongoing reform efforts. Participants described the tension of working within systems they recognized as inequitable, acknowledging the frustration of implementing restorative and relational practices while still confronting data that reflected continued disparities.

Participants further described how their positionality as the only Black leaders at decision-making tables shaped how they navigated conversations around discipline, often requiring them to name inequities that others overlooked or normalized. This dynamic reflects both a sense of isolation and a heightened moral responsibility, as documented in scholarship on Black educational leadership, in which principals frequently shoulder the burden of equity advocacy in racially homogeneous leadership spaces (Khalifa et al., 2016; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Tillman, 2004). Collectively, their reflections affirm that leadership for these principals is not only administrative but also deeply personal, grounded in lived experience, informed by an acute awareness of disciplinary outcomes, and sustained by an enduring commitment to justice.

A recurring theme across participants' narratives was the role of spirituality and reflection in navigating the pressures of leadership. Spiritual grounding, often cultivated through

faith traditions, provided participants with frameworks for enacting care and discipline in culturally responsive ways. This integration of spirituality into leadership echoes Lomotey's (2019) findings that Black principals often draw from spiritual practices as sources of resilience and guidance in shaping equitable school cultures. Reflection was equally central, serving as both a coping strategy and a leadership tool. As Santamaría and Santamaría (2016) note, reflective practice enables leaders to process the emotional weight of their roles while transforming personal and professional challenges into opportunities for culturally responsive decision-making. For participants, reflection reinforced an equity lens and sustained their ability to engage in the complex work of discipline reform.

Mentorship also emerged as a critical theme, particularly as participants reflected on the scarcity of Black principals in their districts and across the profession. Several participants underscored the responsibility to mentor aspiring leaders, emphasizing that representation is essential to sustaining equity-centered practices. This finding aligns with Johnson's (2006) and Gooden and O'Doherty's (2015) arguments that mentorship is not only a professional support mechanism but also a structural intervention that expands the leadership pipeline. By investing in mentorship, participants sought to ensure that culturally responsive and restorative approaches to discipline extend beyond their own tenures and become embedded in the leadership practices of future principals.

Taken together, these reflections demonstrate how the lived experiences of Black principals serve as reservoirs of leadership capital that inform their philosophies and practices. Their stories operate as counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), challenging deficit framings of racially minoritized students and families by reframing personal struggles as sources of insight and strength. This study focused on how Black principals' lived experiences influence their

disciplinary approaches, as well as how those experiences shape their perspectives on student outcomes. With only ten participants, this smaller sample may provide meaningful insights into the realities of Black principals working within the Sacramento area in similar school demographics, particularly those leading with a culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) orientation. Consistent with Santamaría and Santamaría's (2012) notion of *testimonios*, participants' narratives reveal how familial presence, spiritual grounding, and mentorship shaped their orientation toward education, discipline, and care. Their collective experiences underscore the transformative power of culturally responsive leadership in disrupting patterns of racialized discipline and reimagining schools as inclusive, restorative communities.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study examined how Black principals utilize their lived experiences to inform culturally responsive and equity-centered leadership, particularly around student discipline. The findings reveal that Black principals draw from personal histories, cultural knowledge, and community-rooted perspectives to shape administrative decision-making, implement restorative practices, and challenge racial inequities in school discipline. These insights have significant implications for educational policy, practice, and leadership development.

Black principals' lived experiences function as both a lens for understanding structural inequities and a source of leadership capital for creating culturally affirming school environments. Participants emphasized the influence of family and community contexts on educational values, even when families were navigating systemic barriers such as poverty, incarceration, or addiction. The findings further demonstrate how participants enacted principles aligned with Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa et al., 2016) and Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) (Bal, 2018),

despite having received formal training only in traditional PBIS. Rather than relying on prescribed frameworks, these Black principals implemented culturally responsive and restorative strategies through their everyday leadership practices. For example, DL, the “History Leader,” described engaging in intentional parent and student meetings that prioritized dialogue, accountability, and relationship repair over punishment. Cam, the “Spiritual Leader,” emphasized relationship-building as a foundation for discipline, using practices such as a personalized handshake to affirm students, often those most frequently disciplined, and reinforce their sense of belonging. Alove, the “Afrocentric Leader,” extended restorative practices beyond the classroom by establishing a calming corner within the front office, signaling that emotional regulation and care were central to school discipline. Similarly, West Coast, the “Hip Hop Leader,” described leveraging hip hop culture as a tool for connection, using it to build community, affirm student identity, and foster engagement. Collectively, these practices reflect the core tenets of CRPBIS and CRSL, including the disruption of exclusionary discipline, the prioritization of relational and preventative approaches, and leadership grounded in equity and cultural affirmation (Bal, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002). For participants, these frameworks were not abstract theories but lived and embodied approaches to leadership, shaped by their counterstories and sustained resistance to deficit-based ideologies and institutional racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Given these findings, there are clear implications for policy and practice. The disproportionate suspension of Black students demands systemic responses that move beyond surface-level reforms. Accordingly, educational policies must prioritize the intentional recruitment and retention of Black principals, particularly in urban and high-poverty school communities where high percentages of Black students attend, since culturally affirming

leadership and lived understanding of students' experiences are critical to advancing equity. Additionally, principals who demonstrate culturally responsive leadership, an ethic of care, and a deep, lived understanding of students' experiences while building authentic relationships with families, challenging inequitable systems, maintaining high academic expectations, fostering culturally affirming school climates, and using community-centered and restorative approaches to discipline, are critical to advancing equity and improving student outcomes. Increasing representation in school leadership can foster belonging, strengthen culturally responsive decision-making, and improve outcomes for Black students (Welsh & Sobti, 2023). However, recruitment must be paired with meaningful professional support, mentorship structures, and leadership development programs that address racialized challenges in educational systems.

Second, CRPBIS should be adopted systemically as an equity-driven alternative to punitive discipline policies. Participants demonstrated that, even in the absence of formal CRPBIS training, they enacted culturally responsive and restorative approaches that reduced reliance on exclusionary discipline and emphasized relationship-building, prevention, and accountability. These findings suggest that district-level adoption of CRPBIS is necessary to ensure coherence, sustainability, and shared understanding across schools, accompanied by targeted professional development that equips teachers and administrators to recognize and disrupt bias in disciplinary decision-making while fostering restorative school cultures (Banks & Obiakor, 2015).

Third, teacher preparation programs and leadership certification pathways must intentionally integrate CRSL frameworks. Participants' experiences revealed that culturally responsive leadership practices were largely self-developed, drawing on personal lived experiences rather than formal preparation. Embedding CRSL within educator preparation

programs would better equip future teachers and school leaders to navigate culturally diverse learning environments and implement equitable discipline practices from the outset.

Despite the transformative leadership displayed by participants, systemic challenges persist. Many reported racial isolation in leadership roles, limited institutional support for equity initiatives, and resistance to culturally responsive discipline practices. Addressing these challenges requires intentional and sustained policy action across multiple levels of the educational system. Districts should institutionalize mentorship structures and affinity networks that provide ongoing support for Black school leaders, ensuring that their professional growth and well-being are prioritized rather than left to chance. Additionally, policies must explicitly embed Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) into districtwide expectations and practices. Equitable resource allocation is also essential, particularly for schools serving historically marginalized communities that have long experienced systemic underinvestment. To ensure accountability, districts should establish Discipline Equity Review Teams, an approach already in place in some districts represented by participants in this study, comprised of administrators, families, community members, teachers, and students, who are responsible for monitoring discipline data, identifying disproportionalities, and intervening to disrupt inequitable patterns. Finally, expanding authentic partnerships with families and community stakeholders is critical, as shared leadership strengthens equity initiatives and supports more culturally responsive and community-aligned approaches to school discipline and leadership.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that Black principals are essential change agents in reimagining school discipline through culturally responsive, restorative, and justice-grounded

approaches. Their leadership represents both a challenge to structural inequities and a pathway toward educational transformation.

Future Research

Future research should continue to examine the lived experiences of Black principals as a central component of equity-centered leadership. While this study highlights how culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) informs restorative and inclusive disciplinary practices, additional research is needed to explore how these approaches are sustained over time and across diverse school contexts. Longitudinal studies may provide deeper insight into how equity-driven leadership evolves and responds to institutional and community shifts. Further inquiry should also investigate the relationship between Black leadership and student outcomes, particularly in schools where Black principals and Black teachers work collaboratively. Examining this intersection may help clarify how culturally responsive leadership influences discipline, belonging, and academic engagement. Expanding research across districts and regions would strengthen understanding of how CRSL-informed practices contribute to systemic change in educational settings.

Limitations

While this study provided insight into the lived experiences of Black principals regarding discipline and equity in education, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, recruitment strategies limited the diversity of participants and, as a result, the range of perspectives included. Because recruitment relied largely on existing professional networks and connections, many participants shared similar backgrounds and contexts, which may have shaped the narratives' consistency. This approach may have excluded Black principals working in different regions,

school settings, or leadership conditions, ultimately narrowing the scope of perspectives on student discipline outcomes and leadership practices reflected in the findings.

In addition, there was variability among participants in their familiarity with and implementation of alternative disciplinary frameworks such as Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS). Implementation differences based on training, district priorities, and organizational structures are well-documented in school reform literature (Sugai & Horner, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014). Such variability may influence the consistency of findings in qualitative studies, particularly when examining leadership practices that are enacted within distinct institutional cultures (Khalifa, 2018). Furthermore, the timeframe and diverse contexts in which participants worked, ranging from urban to suburban and semi-rural districts, shaped their disciplinary philosophies, access to support, and institutional constraints. Contextual differences are expected in qualitative inquiry and reflect the socially constructed nature of experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This contextual variability influenced the findings and underscored the complexity of examining discipline through the lens of lived experience rather than through a uniform policy framework.

These limitations did not diminish the value of the study but rather reinforced the importance of situating the findings within their specific context. As qualitative scholars note, acknowledging limitations enhances trustworthiness and interpretive credibility (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). These constraints also highlighted the need for cautious interpretation and recognition of the study's scope, while suggesting opportunities for future research to build upon and extend this work.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study illustrate that Black principals' lived experiences, rooted in family histories, community influences, encounters with adversity, and deeply held cultural identities, offer essential knowledge for advancing equity and reshaping school discipline. Their perspectives emerge within a broader historical and contemporary landscape marked by persistent racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes. In California, for example, 3.5% of students were suspended for at least one day during the 2022–2023 school year, yet Black students were suspended at nearly 9%, a pattern that reflects longstanding structural inequities (Wood et al., 2018). These disparities intensify at the local level. In Sacramento County, where Black students are about 10% (Sacramento County Office of Education [SCOE], 2024), Black students faced suspension rates of approximately 12.9% in 2023–2024 (SCOE, 2024), and within Sacramento City Unified School District, where Black students are 11.4 %, the suspension rate for Black students reached 15.3% in 2023. Such data reveal how exclusionary discipline continues to function as a systemic barrier to educational opportunity, beginning as early as kindergarten, where Black boys in grades K–3 remain six times more likely to be suspended than their peers (Wood et al., 2018).

At the same time, the demographic mismatch between California's student population and the racial composition of school leadership further underscores the urgency of this work. During the 2024–2025 academic year, students of color made up roughly 80% of the state's K–12 enrollment (California Department of Education [CDE], 2025), yet Black principals represented only 3.8% of school leaders nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). This persistent lack of representation has profound implications for how discipline, equity, and culturally responsive practices are enacted in schools. By examining the

experiences of Black principals working within urban elementary settings, this study contributes to a critical gap in the literature and highlights the ways leadership diversity informs restorative, culturally grounded approaches to addressing disciplinary inequities.

The disparities in discipline for Black students highlight the urgent need to examine the role of school leaders in shaping disciplinary practices. Leadership is central to how schools foster inclusive, safe, and culturally affirming learning environments (Welsh & Sobti, 2023). Black principals occupy a critical position in this work, as educational leaders and as individuals whose lived experiences are shaped by race and systemic inequities. Research suggests that Black principals often draw on shared educational experiences, high expectations, and culturally responsive practices to improve outcomes for Black students (Welsh & Sobti, 2023). However, this same positionality can place them in a challenging space where they must reconcile institutional accountability with the moral and cultural imperative to protect and affirm Black children within systems not designed for their success.

The findings from this study illuminate how participants' formative experiences with racialized discipline profoundly shape their leadership philosophies. Through counterstories, the principals revealed that their approaches to discipline were deeply informed by their own encounters with exclusion and misrecognition as students. Many described "disciplining with a restorative lens," grounded not in district mandates but in personal histories of inequity and survival. These narratives misalign with broader scholarship on the criminalization of Black youth and the school-to-prison pipeline, which documents how systemic bias frames Black students as defiant or dangerous regardless of actual behavior (Annamma et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2017; Couvson, 2016).

As leaders, the participants in this study consciously resist punitive, exclusionary approaches, instead drawing on restorative and humanizing practices that center care, accountability, and belonging. Their counterstories serve not only as testimony but as tools for leadership transformation, challenging deficit-based paradigms and illustrating how lived experience can be mobilized as leadership capital (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Their work embodies principles of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS), reframing discipline as relational, restorative, and justice-oriented rather than punitive.

Additionally, the participants' reflections highlight the role of community and family as integral to culturally responsive leadership. Many grew up in tightly knit communities where accountability, care, and collective responsibility shaped their understanding of education. Their leadership practices reflect these roots, aligning with and extending Epstein's (2011) framework on family-school partnerships and Ishimaru and Takahashi's (2017) call for shared power between schools and communities. Through these culturally grounded perspectives, the principals in this study redefined parental engagement, not as absent, as often portrayed in deficit narratives, but as essential and deeply embedded in the success of Black students.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on equity-centered educational leadership by amplifying the counterstories of Black principals who transform personal histories of marginalization into frameworks for justice. Their experiences underscore that leadership for equity is not merely an administrative function but a deeply reflective, moral, and cultural act. By drawing upon their lived experiences, Black principals demonstrate that restorative justice, cultural responsiveness, and community partnership are not optional add-ons

to school improvement but foundational practices for creating truly inclusive and equitable educational systems.

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Appendix A. Screening Questionnaire for Black Principals

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your responses will help us better understand your experiences and perspectives as a Black principal for this study. As a token of appreciation, participants will receive a \$25 gift card.

1. Demographic Information

- a. Age: ____
- b. Sex:
 - i. Male
 - ii. Female
 - iii. Non-binary/Other (please specify): ____
- c. Ethnicity:
 - i. Do you identify as Black?
 - 1. Yes
 - 2. No

2. Professional Background and School Context

- a. Current Role on Campus: ____
- b. Years of Experience as a Principal: ____
- c. Total Years of Experience in Education: ____
- d. Additional Leadership Roles Held (e.g., Assistant Principal, Department Chair): ____
- e. School Level (select one):
 - ☐ Sacramento County Elementary
 - ☐ Middle School

- ☐ High School
- ☐ Other (please specify): ____

- If *not* elementary, please briefly describe your school context: ____

f. Percentage of Black Students in Your School: ____%

3. School Demographics- Sacramento County

- a. Urban
- b. Suburban
- c. Rural
- d. Other_____

4. Discipline Practices

- a. Does your role in your school involve discipline?
 - i. Yes
 - ii. No

5. Availability

- a. Would you be willing to participate in a one-hour interview to discuss your experiences and perspectives on discipline disparities?
 - i. Yes
 - ii. No

6. Thank You

Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

8. Contact Information

Name: ____

Email Address: ____

Phone Number: ____

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your responses will help us understand your experiences and perspectives as a Black principal for the purpose of this study.

Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Derived from the readings from Saldana (2018), the following key is used to give a context to how these questions relate to the research questions:

B = educational background

E = Personal Experiences with discipline

K = knowledge of PBIS/Restorative Practices

Personal backgrounds, values, and Beliefs-B

1. Can you share where you grew up and how it influenced your perception of education?
 - a. Can you describe your educational experiences during elementary school?
 - b. How would you describe the environment of your elementary school, including events like assemblies, pep rallies, or other school-wide activities?
2. What experiences do you remember having in school regarding discipline?
 - a. How would you describe any experiences during your education that involved discipline?
 - b. Can you share any interactions with administrators while you were a student, particularly regarding discipline or school culture?
3. When did you start your career in education?
 - a. What made you go into the educational sector?

Discipline Disparities and Approaches-B

4. How do your personal experiences and identity shape your approach to addressing discipline disparities in your school?

- a. Can you share any specific instances from your career in which your identity as a Black principal played into your decisions regarding student discipline?
- b. What unique perspectives or strategies do you believe you bring to the issue of discipline disparities?

Understanding Discipline Disparities-E

- 5. Are there significant discipline disparities in your school?
 - a. What do you interpret as the root causes of disparities in this discipline (Suspensions, referrals, ODR, expulsion) based on your lived experiences?

Culturally Responsive Practices-C

- 6. Are culturally responsive practices incorporated into your disciplinary approaches?
 - a. Can you provide examples of culturally responsive strategies you have found effective in reducing discipline disparities?
 - b. Can you share other discipline practices that you have used?

Challenges and Barriers-K

- 7. Do you address challenges in implementing equitable disciplinary practices at your site?
 - a. What are some challenges you have faced regarding discipline policies/procedures?
 - b. Do you see inequities in which teachers disproportionately discipline students?
 - c. How are you addressing disciplinary protocols before discipline sanctions are given?

Impact and Outcomes-C

- 8. What impact have your efforts to address discipline disparities had on:

- a. What evidence or indicators do you use to assess the effectiveness of your approaches to discipline?
- b. Student behavior?
- c. School climate?

Community and Stakeholder Engagement-C

9. Have you engaged students, parents, and the broader community in discussions and initiatives to address discipline disparities?
- a. What feedback have you received from these stakeholders regarding your disciplinary practices?

Support and Professional Development-C

10. What types of support and professional development have been most beneficial to you in addressing discipline disparities?
11. What current procedures are in place to ensure your staff are equipped and trained to support culturally responsive disciplinary practices?
12. How are you holding staff (teachers) accountable for discipline?

Policy and Advocacy-E&C

13. Do you advocate for policy changes at the district or state level to address discipline disparities? (If “yes,” how so?)
- a. If “no,” What policy changes are necessary to support Black principals in reducing discipline disparities?

Reflective Practice-C

14. How has your approach to addressing discipline disparities evolved throughout your career?

a. What lessons have you learned from your experiences that you would share with other Black principals or educators committed to equity?

Appendix C. Participant Follow-up Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you again for participating in my research study. Attached you will find the transcript from our interview.

Please take a moment to review it at your convenience. If you have any questions, concerns, or would like to clarify or revise any part of your responses, feel free to contact me within the next 10 days. If I don't hear from you by then, I will assume you are comfortable with the transcript as it stands and will proceed accordingly.

Please note that I will be cleaning up the transcript for clarity, removing verbal fillers or false starts, while ensuring that your meaning and voice remain intact.

As a reminder, your identity will be protected throughout the study. I will be changing all names and identifiable information to reflect a pseudonym in any reporting or written work.

I truly appreciate your time and thoughtful contributions to this work. Your voice is crucial to this study, and I appreciate your support. Best of luck with the start of this new school year!

Best regards,

Michelle Benjamin
Doctoral Candidate, UC Davis
 510-205-2565
 mmbenjamin@ucdavis.edu
University of California, Davis